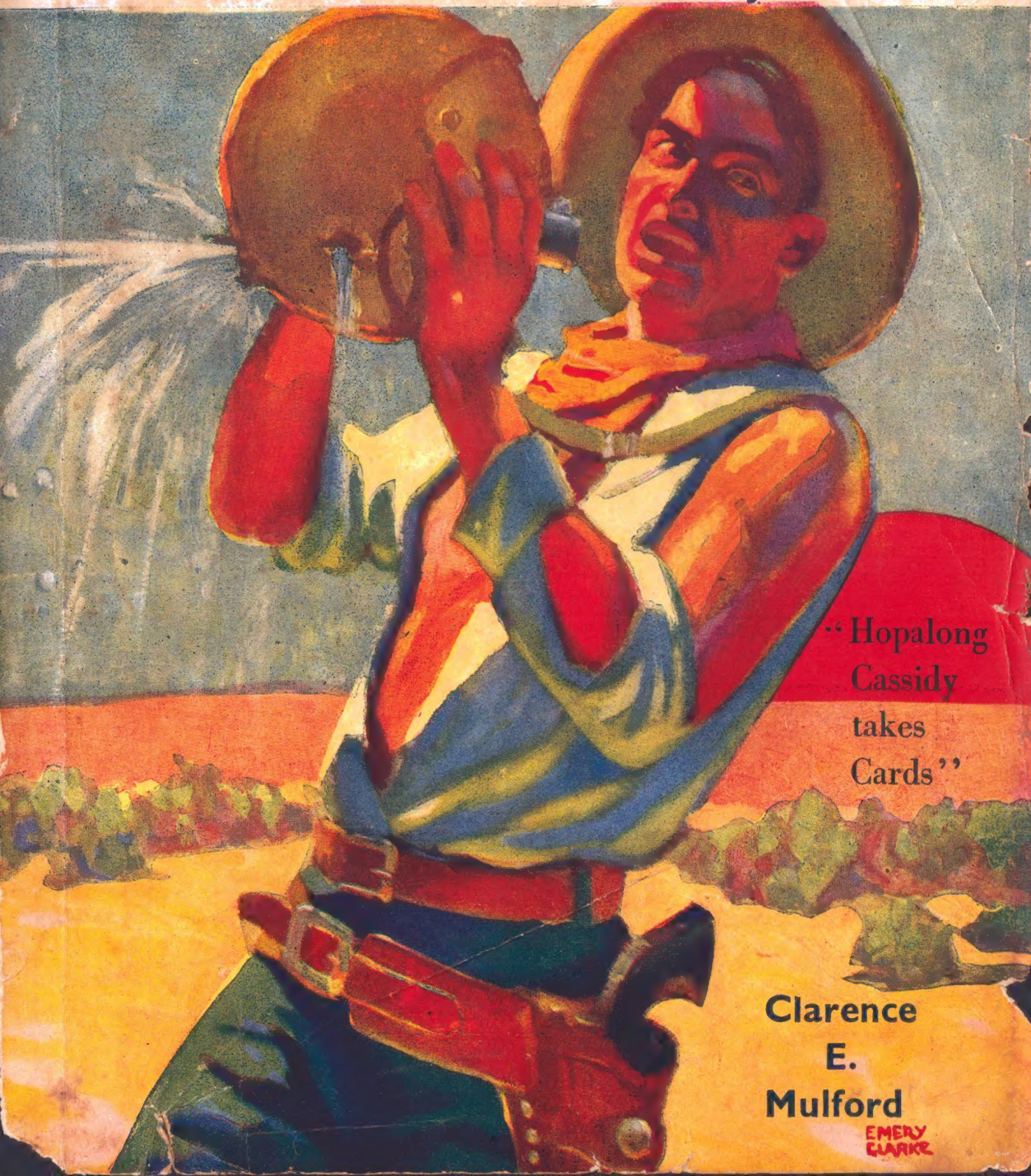
WEST

ONE SHILLING EARLY JANUARY



FIRESIDE GHOST STORIES

1/=

FROM time immemorial the winter fireside has been the place to read tales of the eerie and of the uncanny. Somehow one cannot visualise ghosts and summer sunshine. They fail to materialise against the blue sky, but when winter days come and we gather round the cheerful blaze, the atmosphere is more congenial to ghostly visitors.

In this issue the traditional ghost story is avoided in favour of unusual and inexplicable occurrences; the magic talisman stone which guides the Senigambian people and the legendary character of the Albatross are instances of this design.

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EARLY JANUARY, 1938 EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

WEST

Every Other Friday One Shilling

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ENTER HOPALONG CASSIDY

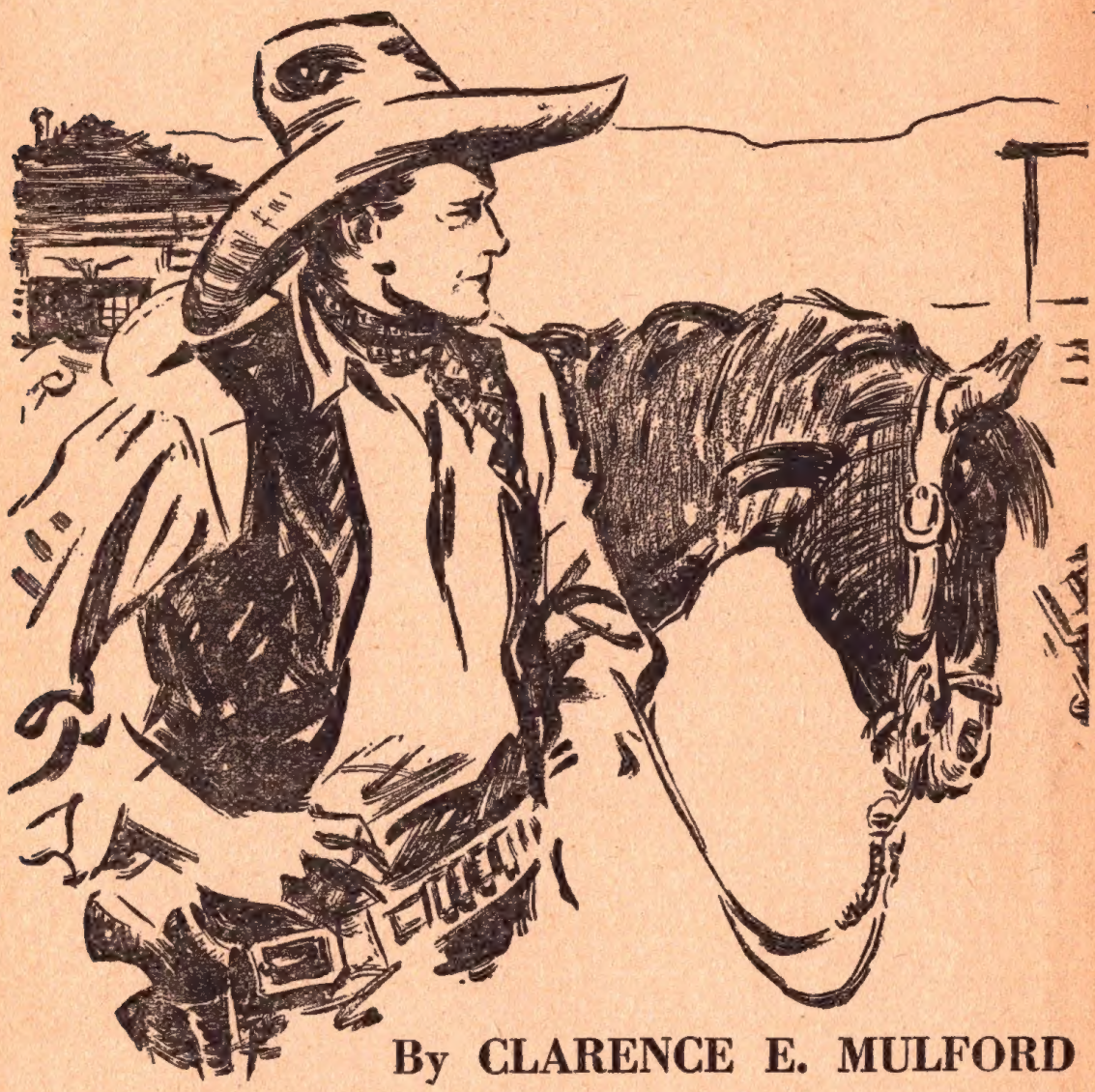
ONCE more we are proud to present in our pages one—no, two—of the most popular characters in all Western fiction, Hopalong Cassidy and Mesquite Jenkins. Mesquite, that rambunctious young tumbleweed, was introduced to Mulford's readers not so long ago, comparatively speaking, but Hopalong now—his friends and admirers can quote his doings from away back. Not very long ago one of them wrote in to ask if we could tell him where the incident of Hoppy's burro eating up the outfit's breakfast came in. We could and did, but thought we'd quote the yarn here. Old-timers will remember it from one of the first of the "Mul" books—"Bar-20"—and for the newcomers to our pages it will serve as an introduction to some of the characters in Mr. Mulford's newest and most intriguing serial "Hopalong Cassidy Takes Cards." And so, we read in Chapter VI of "Bar-20" that:

"Mr. Buck Peters rode into Alkaline one bright September morning and sought refreshment at the Emporium. Mr. Peters had just finished some business for his employer and felt the satisfaction that comes with the knowledge of work well done. He expected to remain in Alkaline for several days, where he was to be joined by two of his friends and punchers, Mr. Hopalong Cassidy and Mr. Red Connors.

Mr. Peters and his friends had sought wealth in the Black Hills, where they had enthusiastically disfigured the earth in the fond expectation of uncovering vast stores of virgin gold. Their hopes were of an optimistic brand and had existed until the last canister of cornmeal flour had been emptied by Mr. Cassidy's burro, which waited not upon its master's pleasure nor upon the ethics of the case.

When Mr. Cassidy had returned from exercising the animal and himself over two miles of rocky hillside in the vain endeavour to give it his opinion of burros and sundry chastisements, he was requested, as owner of the beast, to give his counsel as to the best way of securing eighteen breakfasts. Remembering that the animal was headed North when he last saw it and that it was too old to eat, anyway, he suggested a plan which had worked successfully at other times from other ends, namely, poker. Mr. McAllister, an expert at the great American game, volunteered his service in accordance with the spirit of the occasion and, half an hour later, he and Mr. Cassidy drifted into Pell's poker parlours, which were located in the rear of a Chinese laundry, where they gathered unto themselves the wherewithal for the required breakfasts. A hour spent in the card-room of the 'Hurrah' convinced its proprietor that they had wasted their talents for the past six weeks in digging for gold.

Hopalong Cassidy Takes Cards



By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

Author of
"Hopalong Cassidy, Trail Boss," "On the Trail of the Tumbling T," etc.

I

TWO things, among countless thousands of others, were occurring simultaneously; Hopalong Cassidy, leaving a deputy to hold down the sheriff's office, was on his way to the Double Y, the ranch which he and Buck Peters jointly owned; and a considerable distance south of the town he had just left, another man was riding, bound for this town and for the Double Y beyond it.

On Hopalong's face was the suggestion of a frown, an expression not entirely caused by the deep thought going on be-

PART I

"You Deal 'em Hopalong, I'll Play 'em As They Fall". And the Speaker Was Mesquite Jenkins. So Here They Are Both in the Newest and Best of the Mulford Novels.

hind it. He was puzzled and uneasy, and his easily aroused suspicions were telling him that all was not well, that a game was being played, and that it was the kind of a game in which honest sheriffs, by the nature of their office, should take cards. The fact that there was not a thing on which he could definitely lay a finger did not ease him any.

The trail unwound and passed behind him without his being conscious of the progress made, and when the horse turned the corner of a butte and headed across the range toward the Double Y buildings its rider was mildly surprised.

The other man, years younger than Hopalong, rode steadily, his eyes on the farthermost bit of trail before him. Mesquite Jenkins' eager gaze was at last rewarded, for late in the afternoon the little village of Twin River pushed up into sight, and it was not long thereafter that he crossed the railroad tracks and came to the main street. Although he had ridden steadily since morning he did not draw rein. Having so little farther to go, his hunger could wait. Being hungry and remaining so was no new experience to him. He glanced at the sheriff's office and at the strange man standing at the

window, whose badge proclaimed his office. The little room was open to the rider's view and the sheriff, himself, was not to be seen. One horse, jerking its skin for the dislodgment of flies, stood at the tie rail. It evidently belonged to the deputy. The rider faced forward again, saw a man he knew, and raised an arm in salute.

"Seen Cassidy?" he asked, without checking his horse's slow walk.

"Hello, Mesquite! Yeah; he's out to the ranch. You just get back?"

Mesquite nodded and kept on going, glad that his long journey was all but finished. Day after day he had ridden from morning until night on this long trip up from the southern cattle country and now he was almost back to his starting point of more than a year before.

He shook his head and smiled grimly. At that time he had ridden off to pay a visit to Johnny Nelson and the SV Ranch, and to enjoy any incidental excitements which might arise along the way; but he had tarried in his riding to get mixed up in two range wars which really were none of his business, and had escaped matrimony by the skin of his teeth. He had not reached the SV and Johnny, and now was almost back to the starting point, and eager and hungry for the companionship and understanding of his friend Hopalong. His first, impelling need for Hopalong had died out in minute degrees as the miles had flown backward, but he still was eager to meet him.

The bond between these two men was far from casual. It was almost that of father and son, both loyal. Mesquite wanted to talk things over with the man who had done more for him than had been done by any other man on earth. His contact with Sarah Jordan, back on the Three J Ranch, a thousand miles behind him, had shaken him to the marrow, and it had required all his will power to turn his horse's head and ride again upon his way. He was a tumbleweed, and must be free to roll. The shackles of matrimony were not for him or his kind.

AT THE far end of this steadily shortening trail lay the Double Y, and in its ranchhouse were three people engaged in a mild argument, which by now was practically settled.

Hopalong smiled across the table at his old friend and partner, whose face was still flushed from the heat of battle, and then let his gaze drift on and come to rest on the face of Buck's wife, a face placid and one which retained most of the beauty of its earlier years. When beauty has brains, steadfastness and an even disposition behind it, then it is, indeed, beauty of a sort which is not so quick to fade.

Rose Peters had that kind. Hopalong well knew her strength of character, how well she controlled what temper she had. In all ways she was a sturdy woman. And on the face he looked upon he found a quiet understanding of his position in the argument; Rose Peters did not want her husband to go forth to the wars, but she gave Buck no intimation of it. She knew him too well. She also knew that the quick heat generated in arguments between these two men really would burn nothing.

"Well, I reckon it *is* yore job now," reluctantly growled Buck, shifting restlessly on his chair and having in mind that the duties of the sheriff's office had been his own but a few years before, and forgetting that his first deputy had done all the real work. That was his trouble, that rememberance of office; in his mind he was still wedded to those duties, still the man to tell others what to do. The increasing responsibility of a steadily growing ranch, the lack of lawless threats against its welfare, and the gently increasing inertia of his growing years had persuaded him to step aside in favor of a younger and, if the truth be told, a better man. His present job was better suited to

him, for as a cowman he was almost without a peer for hundreds of miles.

He turned suddenly and faced that younger man, and felt a slight irritation because of the obvious sympathetic understanding between Rose and Hopalong, an irritation caused by their wordless unity in this matter. That it went no farther he was well aware, for if there were two things in life of which he was certain, it was the abiding loyalty of these two. It was not the first time that they had quietly joined to oppose him and, he thought with a sigh, it would not be the last; and, somehow, they were usually right.

"Just th' same," he growled, scowling at them in turn, "I *oughta* go with you. Somebody's gotta go!"

"You've got to stay here, where yo're badly needed," said Hopalong for the second, or sixth or sixteenth time. Buck was not too old to go along; but Buck, having known and exercised authority during all the mature years of his life, would likely feel a burst of it coming on him at the wrong time, and take the bit in his teeth to run the wrong way. And for moments where instant decisions must be right, Buck was slowing a little.

"Yes, yes, yes!" snorted Buck. "You've only told me that a couple of dozen times! You figger I'm hard of hearin'?"

"It ain't a matter of yore ears, Buck; it's what's between 'em that's hard," said Hopalong, and laughed.

"That *so?*" growled Buck, and got back upon the main track again. "Why didn't they say somethin' about it when they first suspicioned that things wasn't just right? Why didn't they make their holler then? First thing we"—from which it might be suspected that he was still sheriff in spirit—"knowed about it was when we was told that we wasn't doin' our duty over in the other end of the county! An' then we was told roundabout! You reckon they figger we're mind-readers?"

"Reckon not," replied Hopalong with a smile which was a trifle grim; "but I'm figgerin' on tryin' my hand at some mind-readin', just the same."

"What you mean?" barked Buck, his interest flaring.

"NOT nothin' that I can put a handle to," answered Hopalong, his hand thoughtlessly toying with the badge on his vest. He glanced quickly at Rose, and then looked back at his partner. "I don't know just what I mean."

"Huh!" said Buck, sitting suddenly upright. "Testin' the wind already, are you?" he demanded. He had heard that remark about handles many times in the long procession of the years which made up the past for these two men; and always the missing handle had been found, and always it had been found in strife and danger and powder smoke. He was peering out from beneath shaggy eyebrows, intently studying the younger man, and he slowly began to shake his head. This time, too, the handle would be found in powder smoke. If he did not have this triply damned ranch on his hands he would gladly aid in the finding of the missing handle.

"Reckon I better go with you, anyhow," he growled, squirming anew. "What you figgerin' to do?"

"I figger to do some hoss-back ridin'; an' you stay where yo're needed, an' that's right here," replied Hopalong, and his eyes glowed at the expression on Rose Peters' face. Wise old Buck; huh—few men were wise in the choosing of their mates; they did not choose them by the

exercise of wisdom. *Lucky* Buck. "I'd feel a sight easier in my mind if I knowed that you had tight hold of things here on th' ranch."

"Yes!" snapped Buck. "*You* do some hoss-back ridin', an' leave *me* with th' spring round-up on my hands!"

Hopalong smiled broadly, well knowing the quality of the outfit which would handle that round-up. Their round-ups ran like a wheel on a well-greased axle. All Buck would have to do with the work would be to take the tally sheets and then chew pencils in furious but misguided efforts to add up the figures and copy them in the book; and then lose his temper, like as not, and pass the mathematics on to Rose. He looked at Buck and laughed.

"You afraid you can't run a round-up without me?" he asked, and saw that the barb had touched tender flesh.

"Run it without you!" snorted Buck. "Hell! I handled round-ups before you was born!"

If that were so, thought Hopalong, then Buck had handled round-ups from his crib, because there was not nearly that much difference between their ages; but he let the remark pass.

"Then I reckon you've had experience enough to be able to run this one without wantin' me around," he said, and then chuckled. "It'll mebby work some of the fat out from under yore hat."

A slow grin slid over Buck's face, and he exchanged smiles with his wife. Then he looked at Hopalong.

"Who you figger on takin' with you on this war-party?" he demanded, the round-up forgotten.

HOPALONG knew the reason for that question. It sounded selfish, but in matters concerning the welfare of his friends Buck was not that kind of man. Buck was wondering whether he would have to replace ropers, iron handlers or cutters-out. Every rider was needed on the ranch, and extra men would have to be hired until the last calf was branded and the wagons headed for home; so it was not any threatened shortage of man power which had prompted Buck's question. There were men in plenty to be had.

Nobody," answered Hopalong.

"Huh?" asked Buck in surprise.

"Nobody," repeated Hopalong.

"You mean to say you figger to play a lone hand up in *that* country?" demanded Buck rather sharply. He knew that part of the country; wild, broken on its eastern side; small mountain ranges, with deep valleys between, in its central part. It had been a famous refuge for wanted men, and was still somewhat odorous.

"Why not?" asked Hopalong, and shook his head gently at the look of concern faintly showing on Rose Peters' face. Rose was remembering how hard this quiet man had taken the loss of his wife and son; and she often wondered if his life meant nearly as much to him now as it once had meant. And then she banished the guilty and furtive thought which followed, for she also remembered that if he ever had had such a thought in mind it would have been in those days closer to the tragedy. Then and not now would have been the time to do foolish and desperate things. Her sudden smile was reassuring.

"I'm tellin' you that you ain't goin' in there alone," said Buck flatly. For a moment he was silent. "Let's see; in the old days, before Johnny got married an' went south, you woulda taken him. Why don't you take Red an' Skinny, or Red an' Lanky?"

Good old Buck—offering two aces of the round-up operations. Hopalong's eyes glowed for an instant, saw the suggestion of pride on Rose's face, and made his own eyes opaque and baffling.

"I'll be too busy to do any wet-nursin'," he said. "Don't want none of 'em." He, too, could be generous.

"Wet nursin' *them* fellers?" snapped Buck. "You not only think a hell of a lot of yoreself, but yo're as stubborn as ever!" he said, entirely overlooking his own, well-known brand of stubbornness. He caught and read the glimmer of a smile on his friend's face, and his own expression cleared. "Huh!" he grunted, and grinned. "When you aimin' to start?"

Hopalong shook his head slowly.

"Don't know. Tomorrow, mebby; an' mebby later. Seein' they wasn't in no hurry sendin' in their round-about yap for help, I don't see why I should be in any hurry helpin' 'em. Somehow it don't smell right; it don't smell right a-tall. Be in plenty of time, whenever I do start."

"Suspicious as ever, huh?" said Buck. "Well, we'll wrastle this all out later; but I'm tellin' you here an' now that you ain't goin' in there alone." He drew a deep breath and relaxed. "Heard the boys sayin' you got a new pair of guns. Why don't you throw that Buffalo Sharps away an' get an up-to-date rifle? Man in yore job oughta have the best there is."

"I got the best," replied Hopalong. "I didn't buy no new pair of guns. Just had new barrels and some new parts fitted to the old frames. An' as for gettin' a new rifle, the up-to-daters that I've seen are all express, an' ain't worth a damn for long range. I'm stickin' to that Sharps. The hoss carries its weight, don't he?"

"That's why mebby that there are so many swaybacks in our cavvies," laughed Buck. "Reckon mebby yo're right; it's a grand old rifle, an' you know her ways. But it's a hell of a load for a man to tote."

HOPALONG reached down, picked his hat from the floor, and slowly got to his feet. He nodded to Rose and then looked at Buck.

"Figger I'll head for the bunkhouse, an' then go on over to my shack: want to think a few things over."

"You can head for the bunkhouse an' yore shack," said Buck; "but you'll eat yore supper right here, with us."

"Be right glad to," replied the sheriff, and walked from the room.

Rose listened to the slow steps, peculiarly accented by the walker's slight limp. They died out and she faced her husband. Her smile was gone.

"Will it be all right for him to go into that country alone?" she asked.

Buck thoughtfully scratched his head and accused himself of having talked too much.

"It wouldn't be all right for nobody else to go in there alone; but I reckon that red-headed hombre can get along right well, in there or any place else. It's for the other fellers to do the worryin'. What are we havin' for supper?"

THE shadow of the bunkhouse roof crept steadily farther from the man who sat on the earth and leaned back against the east wall, his legs stretched out before him on the ground. For comfort's sake he instinctively shifted his position from time to time, and from time to time he absently and almost unknowingly rolled and smoked a cigarette, the smoke curling up from his nostrils and flowing along the under side of his wide hat brim, to stream suddenly upward and become lost.

The bellowing summons from the ranchhouse porch did not break through the wall of his preoccupation, and the first that he suspected that supper was ready and getting cold was when heavy footfalls hammered around the corner of the building and Buck stopped and looked down at him. Hopalong came to with a little start, added one more butt to the sizable pile at his side and slowly stood up, stretching and flexing to get the numb feeling out of some of his muscles.

"Reckon I was a long way off," he said, and smiled.

"Reckon you was!" snapped Buck. "You wasn't in yore shack, nor the cor-

rals nor the bunkhouse. I knowed you was around somers because yore hosses was there in the corral. When I looked in the bunkhouse I saw smoke streamin' up. Don't you know it's time to eat?"

"Yeah; now I do," answered Hopalong, and fell into step with his friend and partner.

"When we're in the house we won't say no more about that country up there bein' tough," said Buck.

"All right," chuckled Hopalong. "It wasn't me that said it was."

"You got anythin' figgered out?" asked Buck carelessly.

"Well, I kinda got the frame made, only there ain't no picture to put in it."

"Well, that's somethin'," replied Buck rather dubiously.

"It would be except you can put *any* kinda picture in a frame," said Hopalong; an' the hell of it is, it's the picture that counts."

"But you shore shouldn't go in there alone," said Buck.

"We'll talk that over at supper," replied Hopalong.

"Like hell!" snapped Buck.

"We will unless I take no man from the round-up," countered Hopalong, and laughed as he slapped his partner's back loudly.

II

LIGHTS shone in the ranchhouse windows and Mesquite chuckled with elation: he was back again! Hopalong, likely enough, would be in the bunkhouse with the rest of the boys. He clattered to a stop before the door, vaulted from the saddle and stepped into the big room. Two men whom he never had seen before were eating supper, and they looked up in some surprise at his precipitate entry; and then the cook stuck his head in the galley doorway, opened his mouth, and gaped foolishly.

"Damned if it ain't Mesquite!" he shouted. "Thought you was down south. You back to stay?"

"Hope so," answered Mesquite, grinning from sheer pleasure. "You look just as ornery as you did when I left. How are you?"

"Fair to middlin'," answered the cook. "Yo're lookin' right good yoreself, though a mite tired."

"Am tired," replied Mesquite. "Where's Hoppy?"

"Up at the ranchhouse, eatin' supper with Buck an' Rose. You had yourn?"

Mesquite was very hungry, and he would disturb the ranchhouse meal if he went up there now. After so many days, so many miles, a few more minutes would not really matter, keen and eager though he was. But something was not right here; then he smiled as he scaled his hat across the room onto a vacant bunk and turned toward the outer door to go to the wash bench. He missed the usual bunkhouse crowd, but most of the riders of this outfit were married, and ate their meals in their own quarters with their wives. This accounted for there being only two men at the bunkhouse table. He would soon make the number three.

"Dish it up, Cook, an' plenty of it," he called over his shoulder. "I'll show you how to eat it. I can eat nails."

The smiling cook laughed loudly.

"You ain't tellin' me nothin' I don't know. I've seen you eat before."

Mesquite soon reentered the room, hung his gun belts on the back of a chair, and paused at the cook's gesture.

"Meet Gawrge Hicks an' his brother, Bill," said the boss of the galley. "Boys, this is Mesquite Jenkins that you've mebby heard about. He shore got back in right good season. Mesquite, we're just gettin' ready to head full tilt into the round-up. There's extry hands hired, but Buck will be right glad to see you, an' that rope of yourn."

"Glad to meet you boys," said Mes-

quite, throwing one leg over the back of the chair and dropping onto it. "An' I'm right glad that there's plenty of hard work ahead. That's just about what I need to get toughened up ag'in."

"Gettin' soft from loafin', huh?" asked the cook, grinning widely; but he was

wondering how a man who looked like whalebone and iron could think that he was soft.

"Yeah, I'm gettin' soft," answered Mesquite, and frowned. The softness he was suffering from was not physical.

The table talk was scanty, polite and perfunctory, the latter two often going together. Mesquite pushed his plate from him and reached for a toothpick. Soft? Huh. He was hard as wrought-iron nails from the soles of his feet to the top of his head; muscle, sinew and bone with but few pounds of excess padding; and yet he was soft! But he was not as soft as he had been, thanks to the fight he had waged with himself for nearly a thousand horseback miles. He'd set a pace in the coming round-up that would make somebody sweat and swear to keep up with him. He wondered if that kind of softness could ever be entirely worked out of a man, or if some of it would stay with him forever, to pester him in moments of temporary weakness. Hopalong would know about that. At least he ought to; he knew about everything that a man wanted to know.

HE NODDED to George and Bill Hicks as he pushed back from the table, strode to the door and took care of his horse. He was back again! Back with Hoppy, Buck, Red and the others; back where a man spoke what he thought, but was wise to think before he spoke. He wiped his hands on his trousers and headed for the ranchhouse, still awkward and stiff on his feet from all that ceaseless riding. The rear door was half open and he pushed it back, stepped across the kitchen and stopped in the dining room doorway.

Buck stiffened a little with surprise and his wife showed hers more plainly; but the red-headed gentleman, sitting back easily in his big rocking chair, smiled widely, and nodded. Mesquite swiftly thought that the red-headed gentleman was never surprised by anything.

"Hello, Mesquite," he said casually. "Glad to see you."

"Howdy, Buck; howdy, Mrs. Peters," said Mesquite, and looked again at the red-headed gentleman in the big rocking chair. "Glad of that, Hoppy. I'm right glad to see you. All of you."

"By Godfrey, here's the answer!" exploded Buck. "You won't have to go in those damn' hills alone now, Hoppy! An' seein' who yore partner is, I ain't doin' no more worryin' about you."

Hopalong chuckled, nodded to Buck, and looked at the newcomer.

"I don't want to go in alone, now," he said, and his face showed a little warmth of feeling. He knew the quality of the young man before him. While he had not made that quality, he had shaped it and directed it and watched it closely. No one he could name would be a better partner. His eyes narrowed a little. "Mesquite, you an' me have got us a job to do."

"Plenty of job, from what I just heard down in the bunkhouse," replied Mesquite, a little confused. His own face warmed a trifle. The man to whom he was speaking had preached the doctrine of coldness to him, preached it earnestly and often; right now he knew that he would be better off if he had paid more attention to that advice. He could not change his nature, and by nature he was

a tumbleweed. "I reckon my luck's comin' back, me runnin' right smack into the beginnin' of a calf round-up, like this. Shore looks like it."

Hopalong was quietly studying the speaker. So his luck was coming back, huh? And he thought he was lucky to run into the hard work of a round-up. He could name plenty who would not call it luck. He smiled again, gently shaking his head.

"That won't be our job, Kid," he said. "We may do some roundin' up — we'll have to if we make good on our play— but we won't do it with ropes an' stampin' irons."

Mesquite kept his gaze on his friend's eyes, but he could see the sheriff's badge fastened to the sagging vest. The badge explained the words, and his answering smile was faint but grim. This promised to be even better than working with the cattle.

"You deal 'em, Hoppy; I'll play 'em as they fall," he said, and his pale blue eyes became icy.

"Good Lord; *sit* down, Mesquite," said Hopalong with a laugh. He leaned over and dragged a rocker closer to his own, patting it suggestively. "Come over here, an' sit down," he invited, and found pleasure in the cat-like smoothness of the youth's answering movements. The bobcat quality was still there.

"Well," said Rose, sighing as she suddenly relaxed. "You boys are in for a long talk, and I've got these dishes to get out of the way." She looked at the newcomer and smiled. "Mesquite, I'm very glad to see you again, and I hope you stay right here, where you belong; except, of course, what Hopalong has in mind."

"An' I'm right glad to see you, an' Buck an' Hoppy; right glad."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Rose. "Have you had any supper?"

"Just come from it an' the bunkhouse," answered Mesquite, and seated himself in the rocker as Rose left the room. Hopalong's heavy hand dropped onto his knee and the strong fingers bit in. Then it slipped away. Mesquite tingled and reached for tobacco sack and papers. So they had a job to do, to do together! His luck had come all the way back. He carefully rolled the cigarette and waited for someone to speak.

HOPALONG glanced at Buck, smiled a little at what he was about to say, and then faced the man at his side.

"The reason I wouldn't take Red, or Lanky or Skinny with me on this round-up expedition of mine was not because Buck needed 'em to work the cattle," he said; "but because they are all married. You an' me, Kid, ain't got nobody depend-in' on us, which is one way of sayin', too, that we ain't hobbled. An' we ain't been slowed up by too much eatin', an' too much loafin' in an easy chair from supper time to bed time, seven nights a week, week in an' week out." He gave Buck a sly look and chuckled, the wrinkles deepening around his eyes. Then he sobered. "It'll mebby be right tough goin', unless we can find a way to soften it a bit; an' we mebby won't know friend from enemy."

"Which means we treat everybody alike," replied Mesquite, his face hard. "Tough goin' ain't strange to me. When do we start?"

"That's somethin', or somethin' more, that I ain't shore about," answered Hopalong slowly. "You see, the complaint we got was made kinda left-handed, kinda roundabout. It wasn't made direct to me. I been thinkin' it over 'most all afternoon, an' I couldn't get nowhere a-tall. But I sorta got to suspectin' that it was a feeler; that somebody wanted to find out, without showin' my cards, just where I'd set in the game, if it was a game. I thought fast enough, however, to send word back the same way: roundabout. I gave 'em, whoever they are, the idear that I didn't see no reason to go ridin' off on no wild goose

chase, workin' up a lather tryin' to put salt on the tail of some rumor."

He paused, glanced at Buck, and then looked at Mesquite again.

"You see, Kid, I went up into that country twice last year," he continued. "Twice—chasin' rumors. I didn't find nothin' wrong so far as I could see. This is the third time that somebody's hollerin' wolf, an' I took it plumb placid."

Finding that no one had anything to say, he went on again.

"Mebby somebody just wanted to see if I'd let myself get fooled the third time," he said, and chuckled softly. "Twice oughta be enough for 'most anybody, but three times would be enough for even a damn' fool. I'm lettin' it ride at twice, far's anybody knows. Twice fooled, an' not fool enough to be fooled ag'in. I just ain't made a move, 'though it's been more than two weeks since the last squawk got around to my ears. But after time enough has passed to tempt somebody to start dealin' some cards off the bottom of the deck, up there, then me an' you will disappear from around here."

MESQUITE looked a little disappointed, for he had hoped for quick action.

"Then we have to hang around here an' wait," he said.

"No, *we* won't," replied Hopalong with a smile. "*I* do, because a lot of them fellers must know me by sight. If only one of 'em knows me, that's enough. I'm figgerin' they don't know you. Now, there's a town called Hackamore, about fifty miles on the other side of that rough country. It's not only outside this county, but it's outside the state. Although as far as my jurisdiction is concerned, one is as bad as the other. If they're bothered, up in the hill country, from this side, they just move over to Hackamore an' wait for things to settle. If they're bothered from the other side, they just stay in the wild country an' don't go to town. More than half that wild country is in this county. What does that tell us?"

He rolled a cigarette and waited for an answer, but none came.

"I don't know how long they been raisin' hell on the other side of the line," he went on. That wouldn't be none of my business, an' they know it. Looks like they was figgerin' to spread their deviltry out a little more, an' in my direction. That bunch of hills an' little mountain ranges an' them valleys is a nice layout for somebody that wants to put it to some use. I'm curious to see how soon somebody will use it when they find that I ain't lettin' myself chase down no more rumors. Twice was enough, and I said so, profane. They must reckon that I'm just about a dozen kinds of a plain fool to let myself get fooled three times in a row."

Buck laughed gently and Mesquite's cold face permitted a faint smile to slip across it.

"Took me four weeks, each time," continued Hopalong. "I wore out my hoss, tired out myself, ran outa grub. I'm tellin' you that some of that country is *wild* country. Only a few trails an' no roads. Lot of little, God-forsaken ranches in there, squattin' in good grass valleys, with mountains an' high, steep ridges in between. I talked with every one of them fellers that I could find, after I'd looked 'em over without them knowin' it. None of 'em had a complaint to make. I just rode around an' around, like a fool dog chasin' his tail. Spent three, four days in Hackamore with some tough eggs that seemed glad to see me. All I did in town was play poker for little stakes an' buy drinks. The poker paid for the drinks. Then I come on home. I did that twice last year. Nobody who had any brains would do it ag'in. Mebby some of them fellers figger I got brains. What's the answer?"

"That you won't be fooled ag'in," said Mesquite, almost in a whisper.

"Right!" snapped Hopalong, his eyes

glinting. "An' this time I won't be fooled, because I feel in my bones that somebody is goin' to start dealin' 'em from the middle of the pack. *This* time when I go in, it won't be on no wild goose chase. You never want to stop a crooked dealer till the last card falls, because until then it ain't a deal; an' no amount of fixin' a deck does anybody any harm until the play begins. I been settin' back, givin' 'em time to finish the deal, an' mebby push in a few chips. When I figger the time is right I'm goin' in. I won't know when that time comes around unless somebody tells me. You are goin' in ahead of me."

"Tell me when, an' where," said Mesquite.

"It should be now, an' up to Hackamore, ridin' into town from the other direction," said Hopalong. "What business would you have in Hackamore, what innocent business? You can't tend bar, you can't play cards, nor anythin' else that's useful to me right now. What excuse will you have to hang around the town? The town is the place to watch until it tells you somethin' to go on. Damn it all, vices come in handy!"

"Then you oughta be a right handy man," chuckled Buck, injecting himself into the conversation. He quickly raised a hand. "Wait a minute, Hoppy! When you were up in Hackamore, you didn't ride on a few days farther an' visit Whit. That's mebby where you overlooked a bet."

"Whit," said Hopalong, and smiled. "H. Whitby Booth. When he was here, years back, I liked him well enough. He was honest an' had plenty of brains; an' he helped us when we needed help. If anybody goes up to pay him a visit it oughta be you. It was yore ranch, yore an' yore partner's then—an' he just about saved it. He turned from cattle to hosses, didn't he? Thought so. Well, that would come easy to an Englishman of his kind, for they shore love hosses. "No," he said, shaking his head and dismissing the affairs of H. Whitby Booth, "I didn't visit him."

"No, you didn't," said Buck, a thoughtful expression on his face; "an', like I said, you mebby missed a bet."

HOPALONG sensed that there was more than idle talk in Buck's mention of the horse-raising Englishman.

"That's twice you said that," remarked Hopalong. "What bet did I miss?"

"Yes, I said it twice," replied Buck, flatly and emphatically. "But it ain't too late to make it now. You just said Mesquite ain't got a real excuse to be seen up around Hackamore, or in it. Whit struck me as bein' th' kinda man, once a friend, allus a friend. Him an' me got along right fine. If I wrote him a letter, or *you* did, I reckon mebby he'd find a job for Mesquite driftin' a herd of hosses summer grazin'." He chuckled. "Mesquite would have to chose some direction to drift that herd, an' if it happened to be in the general direction of Hackamore, what of it?"

"He'd be lookin' for good grass," mused Hopalong, "an' the grass north an' west of Hackamore is good enough—or was when I was there. "Huh!" He looked at Buck and smiled as he nodded. "You ain't nowhere near as fat under the hat as some folks figger, Buck. Question is, will

Whit do it? I wouldn't want no hoss herd of mine very close to Hackamore."

"The way to find that out is to find it out," said Buck, turning to Mesquite. "I'll give you a letter to him, Mesquite; me or Hoppy. I don't reckon he's wearin' no single eyeglass; but if he is, don't let it fool you. An' if his talk strikes you as bein' foolish an' funny, you want to copper that. He's a real man, with plenty of brains an' guts. I'd back him in any play he makes."

"Yes," said Hopalong with a nod, his thoughts racing through the past, "so would I, I reckon. Whit thinkin' of the cattle-dip that time just about saved every head of cattle on this ranch." He shook his head. "I'll never forget that fight ag'in the itch as long as I live! It was touch an' go. We shore had more than our share of trouble in them days, Buck."

BUCK nodded, and his mind went back to the days in question, the days of the last ditch stand.

"No question about it," he said. "He saved the Double Y. Of course, he was lookin' after McAllister's interest; but seein' that George McAllister was my partner then, Whit was helpin' me as much as he was George." Realizing that all this was puzzling to Mesquite, Buck explained briefly.

"Frenchy McAllister was my partner in this ranch when we started it, years ago," he said. "Frenchy died, an' his brother George inherited his share. The time came when I could buy George out, an' then Hoppy bought a part of that. I reckon George staked Whit to his hoss ranch. Anyhow, Whit's raisin' hosses, an' I'm willin' to bet they're right good hosses."

"I ain't hardly even thought of Whit the last dozen years," Hopalong admitted. "Funny how a feller can drop right outa yore life like that."

Buck nodded.

"Whit an' I have swapped letters three, four times since he left here," he said. "That's how I come to know he's raisin' hosses." He suddenly slapped his thigh. "I'm shore goin' to take time off, some of these days, an' ride up there an pay him a visit."

Hopalong's expression became serious and he looked steadily at his friend and partner.

"Seein' how you've waited all these years," he said, "I figger you'll wait a little longer. There'll be time enough to pay Whit a visit after we clean up this rumored trouble in th' hills. Be no use of sendin' Mesquite up there for a job if you show up a-visitin' Whit. That'd couple up Whit right close to th' ex-sheriff of Twin River County! An' that'd couple him up to me!"

"What you gettin' all lathered up about?" demanded Buck with more spirit than politeness. "I ain't said *when* I'm goin', have I?"

"No, you ain't," admitted Hopalong sharply. "But *I'm* tellin' you when you ain't goin'!" He turned to Mesquite. "Come on, Kid, let's get outa here before he tries to bite us."

"Bite *you!*" snapped Buck. "*I'm* the one that's in danger of gettin'——" and that was as much of it as they heard, for they were striding toward Hopalong's quarters, and neither knew that the sky was filled with millions of blazing jewels.

III

MESQUITE rode at a walk past the outer buildings and corrals of the ranch. Breaking pens, branding chutes, a bunkhouse, a blacksmith shop, with its tire stone flush with the earth went slowly past. The ranchhouse, itself, was a frame, one-story structure spread out over considerable ground. He stopped before the rear porch, swung from the saddle and paused before the open door. The sounds of his steps across the porch had been heard inside the house, and a figure moved toward him in the gratefully dim interior.

The figure became a tall, fair-haired, well set-up man of middle age, whose tanned face was gently and kindly lined, and it boasted no single eyeglass.

"Oh," he said, pausing just inside the door. "What can I do for you?"

"H. Whitby Booth?" inquired Mesquite.

"Ah—yes; that is my name."

"I have a letter for you."

"That so? Come in."

Mesquite clamped an arm over his hat and followed the ranchman into the reasonably cool interior, passing through an immaculate kitchen and stopping in a living room, the like of which he had never seen before. The front half of the room had windows on three sides, their drawn curtains reducing the outside glare and heat. The room was large enough to hold a parlor grand piano and not be crowded by it.

Shelves piled high with music and books lined one wall. A violin case lay on the piano, a sewing basket nestled in the upper arms of a short, double-ended tripod and a toy wagon lay under it. The black, shadowy maw of two large fireplaces gave mute testimony in regard to the kind of winters this house had to face.

H. Whitby Booth slowly turned and faced his caller, a hand outstretched for the letter the other was taking from a pocket. His eyes were on the hard, cold face of the caller. He had quickly sized up the visitor as a hard-bitten range rider.

"An offer, I presume, to sell me my own horses, so they may be again stolen?" he ironically inquired as his fingers closed on the soiled envelope.

"So Hoppy was right, huh?" muttered Mesquite, reading his companion's eyes. Not much chance to summer graze this man's horses toward Hackamore.

For a moment the rancher's face remained stony as the half-heard words ran through his mind and then, suddenly, a faint light kindled in his eyes.

"Did you say 'Hoppy'?" he asked quickly.

"Yes. Short for Hopalong," replied Mesquite, glancing at the envelope.

"Sit down! Pardon me while I look this over," said the ranchman, his long fingers tearing paper. He glanced quickly at the last sheet, saw the signature, and then read slowly from the beginning. He read it again and then, walking slowly to a fireplace, touched a match to the sheets and thoughtfully watched them curl and writhe. "I've said so more than once, and I say it again."

"Yes?" asked Mesquite politely. There was nothing Englishy about this man, according to his definition of the term. True, his words had a trace of accent which they would never entirely lose, but it was not very noticeable. He did not realize it, but he was looking at one of the stalwart breed of men who can be found in all of the out-of-the-way, far-flung corners of the world, self-reliant, courageous and dependable, the foundation stones of a mighty empire.

"YES," said the ranchman, a warm smile on his face. "A bit cryptic, eh? Well, it's all simple enough. Years ago I suspected that Hopalong Cassidy and that Ewalt fellow were gifted with second-sight. I'm damned well certain of it now. How are they all? How is the Double Y doing? Well, I hope. You are a new name to me; how well and how long have you known Hopalong and Buck?"

"Th' Double Y is doin' right well," answered Mesquite, "an' so is everyone on it. As to how long I've knowed Hopalong and Buck, and how well, both long an' well enough for me to be handin' you that letter."

"I see," said the ranchman, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Then I'd say it was both long enough and well enough." The name written on the envelope came to his mind. "Ah, when you again see Buck, would you mind telling him that for some years there has been no such person as H. Whitby Booth? Those who know me

call me either Hank or Whit; those who don't, Mr. Henry Booth. That just seemed to blossom out of my citizenship papers. Oh, forgive me—what do you drink?"

"Water, mostly," answered Mesquite with a smile. "Then you've changed yore mind about buyin' back yore stolen hosses?" He was gazing at the work-basket and the toy wagon under it, and for some reason he was frowning slightly. Two months ago they would have been like a slap in the face.

"Yes, rather," answered Whit, following the other's gaze. "That wagon belongs to little George, named after my wife's father. Hope he turns out as good a man. I miss them greatly, but they'll be back one of these days, and the sooner the better."

"Off visitin'?" asked Mesquite.

"Yes, back East, with my father-in-law. Margaret was born and raised in Chicago, and, of course, has many friends there. She's an awfully good sport, and I really don't begrudge her the yearly visit. Her father is getting to be rather well along in years, and her company is good for him."

Mesquite thought that it might be a good idea for Margaret and little George to remain in Chicago much longer than they had planned, but he could offer no defensible reason for this as yet, and kept the thought to himself.

"You must figger that you've lost some hosses," he said, abruptly changing the subject.

"Yes, I have."

"When did you first begin to lose 'em?"

"That I can't answer because I certainly was losing them before I began to suspect it."

"Yeah. When did you first begin to suspect it?" persisted Mesquite.

"Shortly after the snow went off, this spring."

"You rounded-up yet?"

"No; but it won't be long before we start."

"Then it wasn't you that sent word down to Twin River that things wasn't just right in the hills southeast of here?"

"No, I sent no word; but whoever did send it was not very far wrong. Only it is west instead of east."

"It was sent a year ago," said Mesquite. "Hopalong spent a month in the hill country an' found nothin' wrong."

"Then that's easy; nothing was wrong then," replied Whit with a broad smile. "When Hopalong spends a month anywhere, looking for something, and doesn't find it, then there is nothing to be found."

"That's a good way to figger, I reckon," replied Mesquite with a smile. "Then, later on, some more rumors drifted down our way, an' he spent another month in th' hills. An' he couldn't find nothin' wrong then, neither."

"I repeat my last remark," said Whit.

MESQUITE smiled again. He liked this rancher better the more he saw of him and the more he talked.

"An' this spring you lost some hosses, huh?"

"Yes; I just said so. We won't know how many until after the round up."

"Yes," replied Mesquite. "You know anybody down in Hackamore?"

"No. I get my supplies from the other direction, from a town on the railroad."

"Any of the other ranchers up here been losin' stock, since the snow melted?" asked Mesquite.

"Yes. Cattle. This is the only straight out-and-out horse ranch in this region."

"You figger any of them fellers mighta send that word down to us?"

"No. We are not in your county, not even in your state. Complaints were made to the proper authorities, two men came down, rode around for a week or two and then went back again. That's all it amounted to."

"Huh," mused Mesquite. "An' they were not in our county. No raids. Easy, quiet workin'. Driftin'. If those two men had not been sure that everythin' was all

right then they would have sent some word down to us, and it woulda been official, an' not just rumors. What part of yore range did them hosses disappear from, if you know?" he asked, believing that he already knew the answer.

"From the southern. Of course, that's more of a guess than anything else."

"Well," said Mesquite, looking at a clock standing on a long shelf. It had been bothering him subconsciously. "That changes things quite a lot." Now he knew what it was; the clock was going, but it did not tick. "I ain't figgerin' to summer graze no herd of improved hosses down toward Hackamore. They're handy enough to 'em as things are right now." All the clocks he had ever seen had ticked loudly enough to be heard in another room. "I guess we got to figger out somethin' else."

The "we" pleased the ranchman and he sat suddenly erect.

"I beg your pardon," he said hastily, and stood up. "I'm not usually so poor a host. What *will* you drink?"

"Water," answered Mesquite with a smile. "But not now," he added as Whit half-turned toward the kitchen.

"But you smoke?" persisted the ranchman.

"Yes, I have that vice," chuckled Mesquite, recalling Hopalong's words. He looked at the large glass container, took a cigar and watched the ground glass stopper put back in place. The odor of rum was strong about him, and he wondered if the stuff tasted as good as it smelled. His smile grew; you could handle this cigar without danger of it going to pieces in your fingers.

"Well," said the ranchman, again leaning back in his chair and letting a trickle of smoke filter down his nostrils, "we certainly have some problems on our hands, but why not let them wait until after supper? Let's talk about Buck and Hopalong."

AND so they sat and smoked and talked, and the sun sank lower in the sky and made the shadows long and wide. And as they sat and smoked and talked, their liking for each other grew. Their common multiple, of course, was the Double Y and Hopalong. This served as few other things would have served to vouch to each for the other, and to tear down fences of habitual reticence which otherwise would have required a much longer time for their breaching. They both were thinking what they owed to the Double Y and to Hopalong, although neither would put the thoughts into words.

Mesquite was thinking of how Hopalong had torn him from a life of outlawry and its inevitable consequence, guided and trained him, and made a man of him and very much against his own wishes in the beginning.

The ranchman was thinking of how he had been living on remittances when the opportunity came for him to go to the Double Y; of how Margaret had refused to marry a remittance man. He never had any doubt on that score. When his work with the Double Y was at last finished he returned to the East ready and able to stand on his own feet. That gave him Margaret. It was the only way he could have got her. She had given him little George. And he had long since repaid the capital he had borrowed for the starting of this horse ranch. Looking at things fairly, the Double Y had made him. He no longer was H. Whitby Booth, for out of his naturalization papers has blossomed other names. English born and raised though he was, he gave an intimation of his feelings when he replied to a natural and innocent question of his caller.

The talk was beginning to swing back to the serious matters regarding the hill country to the south and west, and Mesquite, his mind on brands and artful work with brands, suddenly looked up.

"I didn't see any of yore hosses on my way in," he said. "What's yore brand?"

"Double Y."

"What?"

"Yes. It's made differently from Buck's and very much smaller, and it's in a much less prominent place. Officially it's the Long Diamond." Whit waved his hand, but his expression was suddenly warmer, softer. "You see, Margaret and I prefer to live on the Double Y."

Bits of biographical data, related to Mesquite before he had left the Double Y now came back to him, and his liking for his host grew a little more.

"Huh," he muttered, looking at the silent but busy clock. His hidden softness began to gnaw at him a little. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the sewing basket, the toy wagon. He, too, was in deep debt to the Double Y and to Hopalong, and he wanted to say something about it, but he did not know how to begin. He was still looking at the unbelievable clock, and it was natural for him to make use of what was handy. He had to say something.

"Why don't that clock tick?" he asked with a suddenness which was abrupt, to say the least. His voice was hard and harsh.

Whit's look of surprise gave way to one of partial understanding, and his own feeling of friendliness climbed another rung.

"It ticks, but you can't hear it unless you get so close that your ear almost touches it," he said. "It's full jeweled and exquisitely made. Has it something to do with changing brands?"

MESQUITE'S swift look rested for a moment on the speaker's face, and what he saw there made him smile.

"Well, no; it hasn't," he slowly admitted, and then an analogy streaked into his mind and helped him out a little. "It's a slick job, that's all; an' so is first-class brand changin'."

Whit nodded his appreciation and glanced out of a window. The curtains had been raised some time before. A glance at the clock confirmed it; it was time for supper. He announced the fact and asked his guest's preference in the matter of food, naming what was available. Mesquite had no preference, but admitted to having an appetite.

Whit not only knew how to cook, in the better meaning of the term, but he also knew how to disguise the common food of a ranch until his guest was somewhat at a loss, judging by taste alone, to know exactly just what he was eating. Supper over, they both fell to and soon had the dishes cleared up and out of the way, and when White ushered his companion before him into the living room he left the kitchen as spotless as he had found it.

Again they sat and smoked and talked, and this time the talk touched a very little closer on intimate things. Then Mesquite hid a yawn, and Whit stirred and sat up straighter in his chair.

"Reckon I'll have to roll up an' call it a day," said Mesquite, and hid another yawn. "I've done a lot of ridin' today," he explained.

Whit got up, went to the kitchen and came back with a lighted lamp. He stopped, looked down at his companion and smiled.

"The bed is made up and everything is ready," he said.

Mesquite slowly arose and faced his host.

"We ain't runnin' no herd of improved Long Diamond hosses even near the south part of this ranch," he said, flatly.

"I think quite a lot of my horses, and they are quite valuable," replied the ranchman; "but if Hopalong needs them

to back up a play or bait a trap, you take them south, and I don't care how far."

The two men stood and regarded each other for perhaps half a minute, and soft lights glowed in their eyes, although it might have come from the lamp in the ranchman's hand. He stepped forward and led the way into the spare room, placed the lamp on a table, waved at the bed, and strode toward the door. He stepped out into the living room and drew the door behind him, but he checked it for an instant, turned and thrust his head into the narrow opening.

"If you want anything, shout. Good night, Mesquite."

"Don't want anythin'. Good night, Whit."

And this time the door closed all the way and the latch-bolt of the lock snicked home.

Mesquite awakened shortly after sunrise and heard faint sounds coming from the kitchen. In a few minutes he was in the washroom, exchanging an occasional word with his host. The sound of a toothbrush being vigorously applied made Whit glance curiously around, and a look of surprise flashed over his face and quickly disappeared. He gave his attention to the cooking food, but his guest had climbed one more rung in his estimation.

Mesquite accepted the third egg and another helping of the crisp bacon, watched Whit unfold the napkin from the stack of toast and reach for the butter. This was real butter and not the oleaginous concoction known on the ranges as bull-butter. Whit buttered the toast thickly and passed it to his guest, and then looked at the empty cup and held out a hand for it.

"If a man can get drunk on coffee, I figger I'm on my way to it," said Mesquite with a chuckle. If this was coffee, then what was that other stuff he had been drinking most of his life? Again he inwardly winced: Sarah Jordan had made coffee like this.

Whit laughed softly.

"I'm a temperate man, Mesquite," he said; "but if coffee led to drunkenness, then I'm afraid that I'd be a sot."

Mesquite nodded, and looked up at his companion.

"I'm askin' you for a job, Whit," he said, smiling a little. "It's too bad you don't need a man right now."

Whit pondered the remark for a moment and then smiled.

"It is too bad," he replied. "As it is I've got more than I need. Even one more would just clutter up the place."

"Well," mused Mesquite, "I'll just have to keep on ridin' till I find somebody that's hirin'. I've got to get a job or starve to death." He chuckled. "Seein' that I've only got near two hundred dollars with me, as expense money, I'm practically broke." The chuckle grew into a laugh. "Not havin' none of them vices that Hopalong finds so valuable, I'll just have to keep on driftin'—just have to act natural an' keep on driftin'."

"That will make you like plenty of other riders," replied Whit, nodding his head slowly. "There'll be nothing in that to make you stand out."

"Yeah," grunted Mesquite. "This country is full of tumbleweeds, two-laigged an' otherwise. I'm just rollin' across th' range, lookin' for work. My kind are either lookin' for work, workin' or leavin' work behind; but we do get to see a lot of country, an' meet up with a lot of interestin' folks." He signified his fullness by pushing slightly from the table and reaching for tobacco sack and papers. "A mighty lot of country," he repeated, the picture of one bit of country strong and vivid in his mind; and again in his mind's eye he could see the work-basket and the little toy wagon out there in the other room. Why must he be the battleground for two such opposite and natural instincts? He frowned darkly and blew out a little breath of anger. "You ever been down to Hackamore?" he abruptly asked.

"Yes, once or twice," answered Whit, "but I don't know anybody down there, and don't want to."

"How come I haven't seen anybody on the ranch but you?" asked Mesquite, curiously.

"They're all up on the north section, building a fence. I'm putting a square mile of my best grass behind wire."

"Ain't you got troubles enough now, without buildin' fences?" demanded Mesquite sharply. Why was he always running into and taking a liking for people who were building fences on the range? And his mind went back to the last fence he had anything to do with, and Sarah Jordan was again brought into his thoughts.

"It's off where it'll bother nobody but thieves," answer Whit, "and it won't bother thieves at all. They'll just cut it and let it lay. There's a few mustang stallions left in this country, and I'm going to keep them from my mares. I'm breeding *up*, not down."

MESQUITE nodded. Another man who had a good and defensible reason for fence building. Mustang stallions, huh—a lot of fool nonsense had been said about wild stallions. Once in awhile they were good animals, but more often poor horseflesh because of inbreeding. But they did make a pretty picture at a distance.

"What's the shortest way to get to Hackamore, Whit?" asked Mesquite suddenly.

Whit smiled at this indication of directness.

"West of here a few miles is the trail you want," he answered. "All you have to do is follow it south. It's a good trail, too."

"I don't want that trail," replied Mesquite, smiling a little grimly. "I wanted to know th' shortest way so I wouldn't blunder into takin' it. By the ti et to Hackamore, if I ever do, I'll wa know quite a lot about th' country around it. You see, meetin' you has made me change my plans." The work-basket and the toy wagon again came into his mind. There was no need to mix this ranch up in any range war, if it should come to one. He pushed back his chair and stood up. "Let's get these dishes outa th' way, an' I'll ride on ag'in."

Whit was quietly studying him.

"If you want to drive a herd of my horses to graze down near Hackamore, you go ahead," he said.

"Won't be no need for that," replied Mesquite. "I got other ideas. You wash or wipe?"

IV

RIDING on his way again and bearing southwesterly, which would take him farther from Hackamore with every mile, Mesquite noticed that the country was losing the aspect of the flatter range behind him, and gradually growing rougher. The slopes became longer and higher; the little valleys between them, wider and deeper; and then the valleys increased their depths as they lost in width.

About mid-afternoon he rested the horse on the top of a high ridge and slowly and carefully examined the country below him. His keen eyes had passed over the wagon without seeing it, but as his gaze swept back again he made it out. It stood in a little draw on the other side of the valley, and while he watched it he thought he could see a thin, pale feather of smoke climb upward beside it. A quick glance behind him at the sun confirmed his opinion; the camp cook was getting his fire going. This pleased him because he was hungry. He pressed his knees against the horse and

sought out the best way down the slope. Now he was certain of a supper cooked by somebody beside himself, for range etiquette assured him as to that. If things were as bad as Hopalong suspected he might run into gun-play, but he was pretty certain of his supper.

Night had fallen by the time he reached the wagon, and the light from the cook's fire cast huge shadows of the seated men while it shone greasily from greasy faces. It picked out his gleaming belt buckle and made intense points of light on his riding equipment as he slowly rode into its radius. He stopped at the wagon and lazily and slowly swung down from the saddle. On his face, a gargoyle of highlights, was a fatuous grin.

"I made it," he said, glancing around the fire-lighted faces. "An' I shore am ready to eat."

"You blamed grub-line riders are allus ready to eat," growled the cook, waving at the tailboard of the wagon. "Help yoreself if you ain't too helpless." Then the cook waved at the coffee pot at the edge of the fire. "Hot or warm?" he asked, grinning despite himself.

"Just like it is," answered Mesquite, filling a plate at the tail board. He carefully carried it to the fire, placed it on the ground, filled a tin cup with coffee, and sat down cross-legged beside the plate, which was as full as he could pile it.

He saw the sly glances from one man to another without appearing to. And then as his gaze moved swiftly around the circle it gave him a confused image of expressions, the total of which did not seem to be very friendly. His gaze dropped to the plate resting on his knees and remained there while he gave his whole attention to the food, which he wolfed. There was no pretense to his hunger.

He dragged the last bit of bread across his plate and chewed on it as he arose and stepped to the fire for another cup of coffee. He poured carefully to reduce the number of dregs going into the cup. He emptied the cup, put it, the knife and plate into the wreck pan, and slowly returned to his place in the seated circle. Sighing with satisfaction, he rolled a cigarette, lit it, and then looked slowly from man to man. Then his eyes rested on the cook.

"I'll wash the dishes," he offered with a grin.

"Lend you a hand," grunted the cook. "I'm afeared you might scratch 'em," he said, and grinned.

MESQUITE nodded and then looked at the man to whom the others had most often glanced.

"I reckon it'll be the same thing I been hearin' for two, three weeks," he said. "You ain't hirin'." He frowned in the short interval of silence. "Nobody's hirin'. Nobody needs a hand. An' the cook's all had a lot to say about this-an'-that grub line riders. Flat busted an' no work; but the old belly keeps a-callin' for grub, just the same. It's a case of eat or starve, ain't it? An' a man'll do a lot of things before he'll starve. But I'll ask the question, just the same; you need a hand?"

The straw boss was slowly shaking his head, his gaze on the little fire.

"Sorry, stranger; but you called the turn. We're like all the rest of the fellers you been meetin'—we ain't hirin'." He seemed to be turning something over in his mind and after a moment he looked from the fire to the newcomer. "Why don't you ride on to town? You may find somethin' there to do."

"I been ridin' to towns an' on ag'in," growled Mesquite. "What is this town, an' where is it?"

"Hackamore, two days' ride east of here," answered the straw boss. "Cook'll stake you to grub enough to see you there, an' the trail is plain."

Mesquite recrossed his legs and nodded. The straw boss had named Hackamore.

That suggested that it was his town, his supply point.

He nodded slowly and smiled a little ruefully.

"Well, that means that I'll eat for two more days, anyhow. Much obliged." He turned and looked at the cook. "You don't have to lend me no hand with the dishes," he said. "I needed that grub an' I'll be glad to do somethin' for it. Grub line ridin' really ain't in my line."

"I've rid the grub line myself, an' mebby will ag'in," replied the cook. "Water's hot enough, I reckon. You rather wash or wipe?"

"I'll do what you don't," chuckled Mesquite, and joined the cook.

"Where was the last place you tried to get a job, stranger?" asked the straw boss idly, pulling at a weed near his knee.

"Hoss ranch," answered Mesquite, reaching for another tin plate. He laughed grimly. "That feller sounded a little like a Britisher, and he was kinda hostile. I asked him the way to the nearest town, an' he told me, an' here I am. Don't the damn' fool know his own part of the country?"

"Hoss ranch?" mused the straw boss, glancing swiftly around the circle of faces. "Britisher? Oh, shore; I've heard of him. Then you been ridin' steady from the northeast, lookin' for the nearest town?"

"Yeah, thanks to him," growled Mesquite, wiping the knife the cook had handed him. "Lucky I saw yore fire, I reckon."

The straw boss exchanged smiles with his outfit and then laughed outright.

"Mebby the Britisher figgered Hackamore was big enough already, an' didn't need one more citizen."

"Mebby," grunted Mesquite, scowling a little.

"Mebby he figgered you might like his hosses better'n he did," said a man beyond the fire, and grinned at the chuckle which ran around the circle.

"Well," grudged Mesquite, grinning slightly, "I saw some of his that looked better than mine. He thinks a lot of 'em, too, because he's puttin' up a fence. That all, cook?" He looked into the pan, blew out his breath and moved slowly toward the fire. "But I'd even take a job with a fence-builder till I got me a little stake. What kinda town is Hackamore?"

"Not nothin' to make it stick up higher than any other town in this part of the country," answered the straw boss. "Just plain cow-town without no fancy work."

"You got any word you want to send in?" asked Mesquite, seated cross-legged again.

"No, reckon not," answered the straw boss.

"If you drop into the Hackamore Hotel bar," said a man near the wagon, "you might tell that long, lanky bartender that Dick Bartell said for him to go to hell."

"By which I savvy that the bartender is a friend of yourn?" asked Mesquite.

"Which he shore is," said the man near the wagon.

"Keno. I'll shore tell him," replied Mesquite, tossing his cigarette butt into the dying fire. He yawned and re-crossed his legs.

THE straw boss got to his feet and moved slowly toward his blanket roll. It seemed to be a signal, and it was. Man after man followed his example, Mesquite not excluded. In a remarkably short time ten human cocoons lay with feet to the fire, and contented sighs told of welcomed rest near at hand.

The small fire flickered, but mostly it was just a dull red bed of coals. Deep breathing and an occasional snore told of blessed oblivion; but one mind struggled against sleep for a few minutes while it searched along a little thread of thought.

"If you drop into the Hackamore Hotel bar, you might tell that long, lanky bartender that Dick Bartell said for him to go to hell." Long, lanky bartender—

Hackamore Hotel—Dick Bartell. And there the thread broke as Mesquite's breathing became as deep as that of any of the others.

The cook had his fire going when Mesquite opened his eyes. The little streamer of pale smoke climbed straight up and vanished. The cook was talking to himself and seemed to be enjoying the conversation. Mesquite closed his eyes, stirred, grunted and opened them to look into those of the cook, and around the eyes of both were little crinkles of good humor. Other sleepers awakened, and the cocoons slowly unrolled. Man after man felt for his boots, his gun belt and took his big hat from under his head. On the open range Stetsons take a lot of punishment, and seem to thrive on it.

Blankets were being rolled up and tossed into the wagon. The wash basin was doing a sudden burst of business, and cigarette smoke mingled with the odors of the cooking food. A man strode over to a picketed night horse, mounted and rode out to the grazing cavvy. By the time he had driven in the day's saddle stock the line was forming at the tailboard of the wagon. Breakfast was a silent affair; hungry men are not given to holding conversations before they have slicked their plates.

The straw boss puffed out his breath, put his eating utensils on the ground beside him and reached for tobacco and papers. He had reduced cigarette making to as unconscious a habit as buttoning a vest, and while he built this one he was looking at Mesquite.

"These parts yore stampin' ground?" he asked, making conversation.

"No," answered Mesquite, rolling a cigarette of his own. "Couple of years ago I started out to see the world. Hooked onto a trail crew an' didn't have sense enough to go back home for the winter. I've seen as much of the world as I want, an' I'm driftin' south as I ride."

"Kinda figgered you come from the south," said the straw boss, smiling a little. "Why don't you fellers down there learn how to talk English?"

"Which same we could ask you boys," countered Mesquite, and laughed with the others.

"Then yore only lookin' for jobs between rides?" asked the straw boss.

"Shucks; I dunno. If I got a good job I might stay with it, except for the damn' winters. I ain't shore. I reckon I'm just a tumbleweed; but I'm the kind that likes to eat."

"What do you mean by a good job?" asked the cook, carelessly.

"Somethin' with more money tied up with it than a common puncher gets; say a foreman's job on a good ranch, or even second boss."

"You must figger yo're a good hand with cattle," smilingly said the wrangler.

"Shore; just like you boys," laughed Mesquite.

THE straw boss slowly stood up and glanced from the seated circle toward the waiting horses in the flimsy rope corral the wrangler had stretched around them. Then, as the crew got to its feet and picked up their saddles, he turned to Mesquite.

"Glad you dropped in, friend. Cook'll see that you don't starve before you get to town. We'll mebby be in town ourselves in a couple, three weeks. If yo're there I'll buy you a drink."

"If I'm there as long as that," chuckled Mesquite, "I'll have money enough to buy a drink."

"How 'bout me?" asked the cook.

"Buy you a bottle!"

"Stud hoss?" inquired the straw boss, curiously.

"No. I couldn't make no money at stud hoss, even if I had a stake," answered Mesquite, looking the man full in the eye. "Somethin' faster'n stud-hoss, an' a damn' sight more risky." He turned on

his heel and went over to his saddle. In a few moments he led the saddled animal to the wagon to get the food which the cook had ready for him. Mounting, he raised his hand in a parting salute and rode at a lope from the little camp, and he did not look back.

The straw boss had not moved and now he was studiously regarding the back of the departing rider. The cook's voice cut in upon his thoughts and he turned toward the speaker.

"Mebby we coulda give *him* a job, at that," said the cook, meaningly.

"Mebby," slowly agreed the straw boss. He thoughtfully rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Mebby," he repeated, and walked toward his horse.

V

TWO score unpretentious frame houses and shacks; a main street two blocks long with rough frame buildings on each side of it connected to each other by a raised, wooden sidewalk to keep the inhabitants from drowning in the mud of spring. Over the sidewalks, here and there, were board roofs thrusting out before a few of the stores. The height of the sidewalks, during the dry seasons, was about even with that of the bottom of wagon boxes. There were tie rails, litter and deep dust; ugly stables, patched corrals, and rusty tin cans scattered at random where careless hands had tossed them. This was Hackamore, neither better nor worse than hundreds of other towns scattered over the face of the cow-country. It was typical. To the rider who topped the last little rise and saw it for the first time it was just another town, so far as its physical characteristics were concerned; but he hoped that it would lead him into high adventures. There it lay and it did not spoil the landscape because the latter was such that hardly anything could spoil it. There was one thing he knew about it even before he saw it; it lay well outside the jurisdiction of the sheriff of Twin River County, and all he could hope for was to pick up leads which might take the action, if there was any, over the state and county lines.

He rode slowly toward the main trail and followed it into town. He was supposed to be broke and in need of a job, and the last two days had given him plenty of time to think this out. The Hackamore Hotel raised its ugly second story above the surrounding roofs, and its faded sign bridged the wide sidewalk and the wooden awning above it. The rider swung to the ground, fastened the reins with his customary jerk knot to the tie rail and pushed slowly through the swinging doors, pausing for a moment when inside the room to let his eyes become accustomed to the dimmer light. This room was no different from numerous others he had seen, but he did notice that the footrail along the bar was brass instead of iron pipe. The man behind the counter, however, did not share in that quality of sameness; he was one of the tallest and thinnest men Mesquite ever had seen.

The bartender leaned sideways against the long counter and eyed the newcomer impersonally, one hand resting on the bar cloth. Except for these two the room was deserted.

Mesquite walked slowly forward and stopped at the other edge of the counter, lazily lifting one foot to rest on the brass rail. He pushed up his hat until it was

loose on his head and smiled at his companion.

"An' what'll it be?" asked the tall, thin man without any particular interest.

"Nothin'; nothin' a-tall," answered Mesquite, and gently cleared his throat as if to hide his embarrassment. "I just stopped in to tell you that Dick Bartell said for you to go to hell."

"Right thoughtful of Dick," replied the bartender with a grin; "but mebby it's just plain selfishness. Mebby he figgers he'll be wantin' company down there."

"Mebby, although I figger none of *us* will be needin' company in hell," replied Mesquite. "I understand that it's right crowded. But that wasn't the only reason I dropped in; I want a job an' I want it bad. Don't care what it is. You know anybody that needs a hand?"

THE bartender was studying him and for a moment did not answer. Then he moved the cloth gently to and fro.

"Where'd you see Dick Bartell?" he slowly asked.

"Out at the wagon, two days west," answered Mesquite, his eyes on those of the bartender. "Looked like they had more men than they needed. They told me where to find Hackamore, grub staked me for the ride, an' here I am."

"Yeah," said the bartender. "What kinda job you want?"

"Anythin'; but I'm handiest with hosses an' cattle."

Uh-huh," replied the bartender, slowly turning to reach behind him. He slid bottle and glass across the counter and waved a hand. "Have one on the house," he invited.

"Thanks; but I don't drink," said Mesquite, smiling thinly.

The bartender's wide open eyes regarded his companion in surprise.

"Huh?" he muttered.

"I don't drink hard liquor."

"Umm," said the bartender, his eyes squinting from speculation. "You don't drink, an' you wear two guns. You friendly with that outfit at the wagon?"

"No. Never saw 'em before I rode in at grub time."

"I got a friend, an' old man," said the bartender, thoughtfully. He paused a moment. "When you work for a man you look out for his interests? In other words yo're *for* him?"

Mesquite studied the speaker for a moment and then slowly nodded his head.

"Of course."

The bartender polished the counter for a moment, and suddenly looked up.

"You go down an' see old man Hankins, at his livery stable at the end of this cross street. He drinks enough for two, an' is frequent drunk. He oughta have a sober man workin' for him, if the man can keep his mouth shut. Tell him Long John sent you. See you later."

Mesquite's next stop was in front of Hankins' Livery and Feed. He closed the door of the little office behind him and looked down upon the sprawled figure of the proprietor. The old man's eyes were closed and he did not move. Mesquite walked over to a chair and sat down, making as much noise as possible, and slowly the old man's eyelids raised and he fixed a watery, bleary stare on the visitor, although it was considerably out of focus.

"Aw right," he muttered. "Pick yore own stall an' take care of yoreself. Sick, awfu' sick. Oh-a-a-a!"

"I'm lookin' for a job," said Mesquite. "Mebby I better come back later."

"Oh-o-o-o! What say?"

"Lookin' for a job. I'll be back later."

"Job. Job? Kin you figger?"

"Yeah."

A sly look passed across the sodden face and a look of faint intelligence came into the reddened eyes. The old man inched up a little straighter in the oft-repaired rocking chair and raised a hand to fumble on the desk top. After a moment's search the fingers closed on a

sheet of paper which was covered with figures. The old man slowly passed it to his companion, and leered knowingly. "P-prove it."

BECAUSE of the number of figures Mesquite knew it must be a problem in addition, and the several totals, each crossed out, made him smile. He picked up a pencil, wet the point and fell to. After a moment he handed the sheet to the proprietor.

The old man tried to focus on the figures, failed to get the range with both eyes simultaneously, and let the sheet fall to the floor.

"D'ju do it? Is it right?"

"Yes. It's right."

"Uh. You know hosses?"

"All my life."

"Oh-o-o-o—so sick. So sick. Yo're hired. Don't pester me—now. Too sick."

Mesquite arose, got his horse and took care of it. Then he looked the place over. During his tour he found the little house out behind the main building, and he also investigated this. It consisted of a kitchen and two small bedrooms. One bed, from its condition, looked to be the one the old man used. He made it up roughly and went back to the office. Old man Hankins had passed out again.

Mesquite picked him up and carried him into the little house, where he pulled off the boots, removed the big hat, and laid the old man on the bed. The window had divided curtains, and Mesquite drew them together and fastened them with a blanket pin. Closing the door part way, he went back to the office and waited for customers. He needed no instructions in the matter of the proper charges. No customers came, but suppertime did. He reversed the sign in the window, which laconically proclaimed: GONE TO EAT, and went through the long building toward the little house in the rear.

The kitchen was a mess of accumulated dirt and untidiness, but he started the fire and got things ready for the meal before he tackled the confusion about him. While the supper was cooking he washed the stack of soiled dishes and tidied up generally. Occasionally he listened to the snores coming from the other room, but there was no change in their sound. All right; let the old fool sleep it off. Coming down to cases, that was about all that could be done. He had plenty to do without fooling with a man who was dead drunk.

Mesquite was hungry and he cooked plenty of ham and potatoes, making a sizzling brown ham gravy for lubricant. He filled a plate with ham and potatoes and covered it with a cloth in case the old man should wake up before breakfast and be hungry. This was not a probability, but only a possibility.

He washed and wiped the dishes, washed out two dirty pieces of cloth for further dishwashing and wiping, and hung them over the stove on a piece of half-inch manilla rope which served for clothesline. It made him laugh, for it seemed strong enough to hold up a horse. Giving one final listen to the steady, blubbery snores coming from the old man's bedroom, he slipped out of the door and headed for the stable. When he returned he had his saddle, bridle, rifle and bed roll. The load was heavy and bulky and decidedly awkward, but he managed it and dumped it on the floor of the second bedroom. Turning down the lamp, he slipped from the building and headed back into the stable. Still there were no customers, but he waited awhile, and then locked up and went up the street toward the Hackamore Hotel.

LONG JOHN, to Mesquite's surprise, was still on duty and ventured a cold smile as the puncher, now a horse nurse, walked in.

"You keep long hours," said Mesquite, leaning on the counter.

"Yeah. Ben wanted to go off somewhere an' asked me to run his trick," replied the bartender, idly sliding the damp cloth back and forth. "Old man hire you?"

"Shore; but he don't know it yet," chuckled Mesquite. "I added up a column of figgers for him, carried him in an' put him to bed, ate my supper an' then hung 'round waitin' for customers. None came, an' when I figgered it was time to close, I closed. Here I am. Much obliged."

"The old man is as short on figgerin' as he is long on liquor," said Long John. His smile suddenly disappeared and he looked intently at the man across the bar. "Hankins is a friend of mine. He's a friend of Dick Bartell's; but I'm a better friend of his than Bartell is. Play square with him, look after him, an' you won't make no mistake."

"I aim to do all that if he don't fire me when he comes out of it in the mornin'," replied Mesquite with a grin, and departed.

Mesquite had just reached the door of the office when there came the sudden pounding of hoofs and a bunched group of riders turned the corner from Main Street and whirled down the side street to the stable. Mesquite saw a group of led horses in the middle of the bunch and then the horsemen stopped in front of the stable and dismounted as one man, and all but the man holding the lead ropes of the led horses stepped quickly to the big door and tried to open it. One of them, catching sight of Mesquite in the dark recess of the office door, took a step forward and spoke angrily.

"Hurry up, you old fool; get this door open!"

MESQUITE passed through the office and unfastened the stable door, and as the hasp dropped the door slid back with a bang and the horses surged in, the door closing swiftly behind them.

"Why didn't you watch for us? You knew we was comin' in?" demanded a voice from the darkness above the sounds of moving horses.

"I didn't know about it," replied Mesquite. "The old man's dead drunk." He took two swift steps sideways as he spoke and his hand dropped to his gun.

"Hell!" swore one of the group.

"Who the hell are *you?*" snapped another.

"Ask Dick Bartell," replied Mesquite, again shifting, and this time the gun was out and in his hand.

"Light the lamp in the office! We'll take a look at you!"

"Don't light no lamp in the office!" said another rider. "Ain't you got no sense? Get the lanterns an' light one in a stall."

"Damn' old fool!" snapped the first speaker. "I got a mind to shoot his head off! He took a step in the darkness. "Here, you! Where are you?"

"Right here," came the answer and it sounded icy. This time Mesquite stepped quickly to the left. If this hombre should shoot by sound, his first shot would be a miss, and the flare of the gun would be all that Mesquite would need.

"Then stay there for a minute," growled the other. "Then get out the back door an' into the house, an' don't make no funny motions."

Mesquite was as anxious to get a look at the riders as they were to get a look at him, and he thrilled with the thought that perhaps he had been lucky in getting his job. As the thought passed through his mind he was walking heavily and noisily toward the rear door, two men close at his heels and he was quite certain that both had guns on him.

The two men crowded after him into the kitchen and one of them stepped to the table and turned up the lamp, without once losing sight of the new stableman.

"Who are you, an' what you doin'

here?" demanded the leader, his low-held gun unswerving.

"They call me Mesquite," came the slow reply, "an' I just got the job of stable hand. I don't aim to make no trouble. The old man is dead drunk, in there in his bed. Mister, if I knowed you was comin' in, I'd had the door open. I need this job an' I want to keep it. The door will be open, next time."

The man who had turned up the lamp went into Hankins' bedroom and came out again, and he nodded angrily.

"Drunk as three fools," he growled, and then looked at Mesquite. "I figger you better quit this job, an' clear out. When did the old man hire you?"

"Late this afternoon," answered Mesquite. "He was so drunk I figger he didn't know hardly what he was doin'. Dick Bartell sent in a message with me for a feller here in town, an' *he* sent me down here to try for a steady job. I got the job, an' I need it. I'll do as I'm told, Mister."

"What was the message, an' who was it to?" demanded the leader.

"I ain't got no business to tell you that. I keep a close mouth. You'll have to ask Bartell."

"Huh!" muttered the leader. He took a little time to follow out a thought, and he had lost a little of his scowl when he asked his next question. "Where you from, Mesquite?"

"Up from the south with a trail herd a couple years back," answered Mesquite, careful to make his answer correspond with the one he had given out at the wagon. "I didn't have sense enough to ride back ag'in. I hung around, ridin' for one outfit after another till jobs got scarce. I need this one if I figger to eat. I'll have the door open any time you say." He glanced at the window facing the stable. "Don't you reckon I better go out an' look after yore hosses. They was pretty warm an' oughta cool off under a blanket."

"They're bein' took care of," replied the leader, glancing at his companion, who moved his head toward the door. "All right. Turn in, an' stay there. I don't want to see you before tomorrow, an' I shore will see you then."

Mesquite watched them pass through the door, then slowly unbuckled his gun belts and hung them over a chair. Then he sat down and pulled off his boots, and gave every indication that he was following instructions and was headed for bed; and that was exactly what he was doing and where he was going. He would like to feel over the horses to verify his suspicions that they had been hard ridden and well lathered; but at this time curiosity was something which he must not show. He had been told to turn in. That seemed to be the thing to do, and he proceeded to do it.

(*Part II in the Next* WEST

The Sheriff Had a Hunch He'd Better Let His Deputy Have a Little Practice

A Little Practice

By S. OMAR BARKER

Author of "Hunch Holds Hands," "A Rimrock Hunch," etc.

THREE times in as many weeks One-Eyed Sneed's dinky short-run stage from Chuparosa had been stuck up by a lone masked bandit, not many miles from town, and its express boot ransacked.

Some two hours after the third robbery One-Eyed stomped into Sheriff Hunch McElroy's office, plenty riled.

"Got took agin, dammit!" he snorted. "Hell of a sheriff you are, when——"

"Where at this time, One-Eye?" The banty, dried-prune of an officer spoke calmly, looking up from a checker game with his wife's nephew, whose homely, freckle-spattered face loomed dimly in the dusk above the deputy's star on his shirt.

"I drawed up in the Slow Crick ford to let my mules drink a smidgin, an' he riz from the brush, helt his persuader on me, taken what gold dust was in the boot, an' pulled out afoot up the crick, right in the water. If you'd been out there layin' fer him, like I asked you—"

"We'd have been layin' out in the sandhills where it happened before," put in Hunch dryly, "whilst he took you in at the crossin'."

"Well, dammit, you could be a-doin' somethin' besides playin' checkers, anyways! Tracked him to his horse, or—"

"Water," observed the banty old sheriff, "washes out tracks, same as the wind done them two times out in the sandhills. I got a hunch that—"

"Hunch hell!" snorted One-Eyed Sneed. "What's the idee appointin' this nephew o' yours a deputy if you an' him's goin' to set around here playin' checkers whilst there's a stage robber lurkin' right here in this town?"

"Well," drawled Sheriff McElroy twangily, "Rusty come to visit us a spell, an' with two, three extry badges layin' around, I figgered he might as well be wearin' one, gittin' him a little practice, so to speak."

"Practice hell!" One-Eyed snorted again. "I tell yuh one thing, Hunch; I ain't reportin' no more robberies to you secret so folks won't know you ain't doin' your duty! Nossir, I'm gonna tell ever'body in town! I'm gonna—"

"If it's gittin' dark enough you think she kin stand it," broke in Hunch again, "you better git on home an' kiss your wife.

Maybe there won't be no more robberies. I gotta hunch—"

"Hunch my hind end!" snorted One-Eye, and stomped out angrily.

A VERY few minutes later Sheriff Hunch McElroy and his practicin' deputy came out into the evening dusk. Half a block down they separated. Hunch turned in at Sid Smith's butcher shop.

Deputy Rusty Paulsen met One-Eye Sneed as he came out of his house, wiping his mouth after a very hasty supper. Bristling with indignation, One-Eye was headed downtown.

"What *you* want?" he snapped, as Rusty fell into step beside him. "I don't need no guard."

"Uncle Hunch figgers your mouth does," said the young deputy solemnly.

Presently One-Eye turned in through bat-wing doors, and Deputy Rusty Paulsen followed. The Gray Mare Saloon was crowded, as always. It was the little town's favorite rendezvous. It was said thereabouts that if a man needed an alibi, all he had to do was drop in at the Gray Mare for a few minutes where everybody could see him, and there'd be a dozen men ready to swear he was there at whatever hour he might claim, depending on how drunk they were when they saw him.

"Now don't spill no talk in here," advised Rusty mildly as they went in.

Maybe One-Eye Sneed meant to obey him, maybe he didn't. But halfway to the bar he stopped, staring at the figure of a man sitting alone at a card table, his head and shoulders slumped over on it, apparently asleep. He was a smallish man, and One-Eye recognized the old slouch hat that lay tilted half over his face. The recognition seemed suddenly to boil him over. Anger gurgled in his throat, busting out in a bellow that turned every eye his way.

"Lookit him! Jest lookit him!" he shouted. "Hell of a sheriff we got, gents, layin' around in a saloon snoozin'!"

"Why not?" grinned a cowboy. "Y'don't expect a sheriff to go rampsin' around blowin' fire outa his nose all the time when there ain't no crime been committed, do you?"

"Yeah," said another, "maybe he's been settin' up too late playin' checkers. Long as he don't snore, let 'im snooze!"

"Snooze hell!" snorted One-Eye. "I'll wake him up! Listen, gents; my stage was helt up an' robbed this evenin' at the Slow Crick ford. Two weeks ago an' the week before that it was helt up out in the sandhills. But this here snoozin' sheriff wouldn't let me raise no beller about it! Oh, no! 'Jest report to me secret, One-Eye,' he says, 'an' I got a hunch we'll ketch this robber mighty easy!' Dang his hunches, gents! I'm a tax payin' citizen, an' I ain't gonna put up with it no longer! An' look what he hires fer a deputy, his wife's nephew—to play checkers with him whilst honest citizens gits robbed an' murdered!"

"But you ain't been murdered—yet," interposed Deputy Paulsen mildly.

"You shut up! Such a sheriff is a disgrace to the community, an'—"

"Funny ol' Hunch sets there an takes it," commented Poco Pete, the bartender. "Must be sleepin' mighty sound. Hey, Hunch, there's a coyote that thinks he's a wolf snappin' at your heels. Better wake up an' hush him!"

But the little man at the table did not stir.

"Drunk, dead drunk," said a tall hombre in a spankin' new black hat. "An' this man's stage jest robbed! It's a damn shame, ain't it?"

For a moment a murmur arose along the bar, some of it pretty harsh comment on the sheriff, some of it in his defense.

"Hey, Hunch!" somebody yelled.

The little sheriff did not stir.

"By the gravies, *I'll* wake him up!" snorted One-Eye. "An' I'll tell him a thing or two, too!"

Belligerently he strode across the room,

Deputy Paulsen's gangling figure close at his heels. His fingers clamped on the banty sheriff's shoulder, yanked sharply.

"Wake up, dang yuh! I—oh, goshamighty!"

The little man's body lurched limply at his pull, and on the table where it had lain there stood a pool of blood.

With startling suddenness the young deputy came alive. He yanked One-Eye back away from the table, took charge like a veteran. His eyes covered the crowd while his fingers swiftly probed under old Hunch's shirt, front and back, and came away bloodsmeared. Then he straightened, snapped out his gun.

"Too late to help *him* any," he said in a hard voice. "This dirty job's been done with a knife—an' mighty recent. Don't nobody try to leave here or—that's right, Pete, you cover the front door!"

"Anchor yourselves, gents," said Poco Pete grimly over the double barrels of a sawed off shotgun.

"Goshamighty!" cried One-Eye. "I never dreampt he was dead or—"

"Shut up, then!" snapped the deputy, "An' cover the back door! Don't let nobody out! I'm gonna search every man here, an' if I find a bloody knife—"

He didn't say just what action he'd take, but went to work at once, grimly.

A GRIZZLED old cattleman who had ridden trail with Hunch in other years—and quarreled with him regularly ever since—stepped up to help.

"Search me, boysh," urged a well-filled cowboy. "Never carry knife anywaysh, fear cut mashelf!"

Strangely enough nobody tried to leave, nobody objected to being searched, although the tall hombre in the new black hat and his two drinking companions made sarcastic remarks:

"What you take us for, a bunch of knife-totin' Mexkins?"

"What you doin', Deputy—practicin'?"

Deputy Paulsen and old man Featherstone went through them quickly. No knives except pocket knives too short to have driven clear through a man—even as thin a man as Hunch McElroy. And no blood stains, even on those.

"All right," snapped Deputy Paulsen finally, facing the line-up. "Off with your boots! We'll look in them!"

"Better bust a bottle of whiskey, Pete," commented the black-hatted hombre with what he took to be humor, "to kill the smell!"

Standing first on one foot and then the other, cowboys, stockmen, miners, town loafers, all began to pull off their boots. Deliberately, methodically Rusty Paulsen's eyes scrutinized every pair, plunging a searching hand into every boot.

Some seemed hard to get off. The hombre with the new black hat seemed to have trouble with his. Finally, however, he handed them out.

Deputy Paulsen's hand reached into one of them, and as it came out he dropped suddenly to one knee, grasped the black-hat's sock a brief instant, then jerked erect.

"All right, mister," he said. "Put 'em up! We got you!"

"For what, you damn fool? You ain't found no knife on me, nor nothin' to—"

"No, no knife," said the young Deputy quietly. "Just wet socks—that you didn't take time to change after you held up One-Eye's stage an' waded Slow Creek for your getaway. I said *put 'em up!*"

With a snarl the man's hands went up. But at the same instant a whiskey bottle

in the hands of one of his pardners whammed down on Deputy Paulsen's head, and as he tottered on his feet, the black hatted hombre's hands jerked down again, reaching for his gun. Stunned, Deputy Paulsen's gun arm sagged. He reached his left across to help steady it.

But already the other man's gun was out of the holster.

"You ain't arrestin' me, punk!"

A shot crashed, rattling the glassware behind the bar.

"Anybody else feelin' too peert?" inquired a dry, twangy voice. At the corner table stood old Hunch McElroy, blood smeared, but as calm as a catfish, a smoking .45 in his hand. The stage robber with the wet socks yowled a curse. From the bullet-shattered grip of his right hand his unfired gun clattered to the floor. His left reached swiftly and urgently for the ceiling.

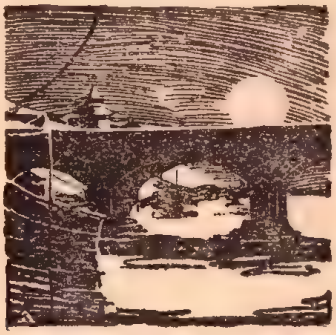
WITH a dry grin Sheriff McElroy advanced across the room, gun drawn and ready.

But there was no need now. Deputy Paulsen had his prisoner.

"Hey, One-Eye," drawled old Hunch twangily, "didn't I tell you I had a hunch we'd git 'im!"

"But—but—but gawdamighty, Hunch!" stammered One-Eye. "I thought you was kilt. All that blood—I thought—"

"Beef blood," said the banty sheriff dryly. "Sid Smith give me a whole whiskey bottle of it. So I eased in here an' smeared it on me, pertendin' I was dead so as to give Rusty a good excuse for searchin' ever'body's boots till he found some feller with wet socks. Jest because he's my wife's nephew you don't figger I'd let Rusty wear a star around without tryin' to give him a little practice, do you?"



GOLF AT TIENTSIN

Kenneth P. Wood

THE ancient Chinese city of Tientsin has a golf course for resident Englishmen. But the chief hazards on the links are of a rather gruesome character, since they consist of the graves of deceased Chinamen. The modern golfing architect is rather in favor of mounds as hazards, and, as might be imagined in an oriental cemetery, he might glean some ideas from the graves of Tientsin. A certain emperor's grave has been, since time out of memory, a favorite name for some bunker of particularly infamous reputation in that country, but it has never borne so literal a meaning in China. The golf course, being situated on a large, flat plain close to the city, offered a convenient burial ground, much to the inconvenience of the golfers. However, the less pious Chinamen prove an accommodating people, and a bargain was struck whereby, for a payment of four taels, a coffin could be removed and dumped down somewhere else, and the green committee could flatten down the impeding mound.

Flintlocks of the Wabash

By RAY MILLHOLLAND

Author of "Hair Trigger Testimony" and Other Stories Where Rifles Are of Supreme Interest

IF HE had been born with a cautious, plodding spirit, Tom Underwood's financial success as a master builder of fine Kentucky flintlock rifles would have been assured. But no, he had to turn his back on Lancaster, Pennsylvania, famed as the arms-making center of the New World, and turn his face to the wilderness.

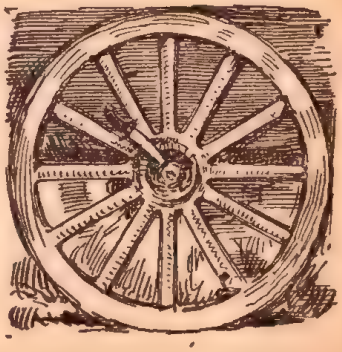
The great Deschert had taught him how to weld a flat bar of finest wrought iron into a hollow rifle barrel; how to bore it true and glistening smooth; and most important of all, how to cut the spiral grooves that sent the leaden ball spinning to its mark with uncanny accuracy. And now Tom Underwood was leaving a hundred customers behind for every one he could expect to find among the scattered settlements of the Wabash country.

His travel worn moccasins picked the soft places to step as he slipped along the faintly discernible trail. A wild turkey would make a fine supper for a man who had been packing eighty pounds of gunsmithing tools all day and who had eaten nothing since morning but a handful of parched corn and a strip of jerked venison. Yes, this was the famed wild turkey country of the Wabash. Good place too, behind one of those huge, spreading beeches, for a hostile Indian to be lurking, ready to sink a tomahawk through a coonskin cap for sake of the fine rifle Tom carried in the crook of his arm.

A faint splashing in some unseen but nearby stream checked his stride. Through the willows parted with his left hand he could see a lad-sized figure in fringed buckskin stalking with infinite care a deer drinking from a pool. The buck tossed a magnificent pair of antlers and stamped nervously. Tom watched the long barreled rifle of the youthful hunter swing up.

The echo of a heavy black powder charge rolled through the creek bottom. Untouched, the buck whirled in his tracks and went crashing up a steep hillside. Then Tom Underwood's rifle cracked not

Tom Underwood Turns His Back on Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Arms Making Centre of the New World, and Turns His Face to the Wilderness



so loudly as the other's weapon had done. Without stopping to peer through the thick white smoke now between himself and the deer, he quickly unstoppered his powder horn with his teeth, holding the powder measure in the same fingers that supported his rifle muzzle.

Swiftly the long rifle was loaded; a light bump of the butt on the ground to settle the powder charge, a patch whipped over the muzzle and the ball started in with a quick nip of his thumb; then a series of quick taps of the ramrod to send the bullet home. Rifle freshly primed and the frizzen snapped back in place, he stepped out of concealment.

"Howdy, Bub?" he said to the youth who stood staring open-mouthed at the dead buck on the hillside. Receiving no answer, he stepped closer; but instead of getting a better look at the smooth cheek half concealed by heavy shadows, the shoulder fringe of an embroidered hunting shirt was all that there was to admire. "Right handsome tailoring," he mused teasingly. "But if I were you, Bub, I'd load that old Charleville musket you just emptied. Good habit, unless you don't give a Continental for that pretty yellow hair of yours."

Suddenly a girl's indignant blue eyes flashed her scorn for him over a slim shoulder. "A Charleville!" she exclaimed in the act of ramming home a lead ball almost twice the size of one Tom Underwood shot in his rifle. "A lot you know about rifles!"

UNABASHED, he stepped closer, watching the girl with no effort to conceal his amused interest in both the gun and its owner. "Take it all back, Mam. That isn't no common, ornery Charleville musket like Lafayette's Frenchies brought over to help General Washington lick the Red Coats. No, sir; somebody right fancy with his tools has prettied her all up."

The girl stamped a dainty moccasin and held up her elaborately carved and inlaid rifle. "The best gunsmith along the Wabash made this rifle. He finished it just yesterday, and I haven't had time to practice with it yet." A lofty pride brightened her eyes. "Don't you dare say this rifle doesn't shoot true; because my father made it!"

Tom's heavy pack slid from his shoulders. Out came the long, polished blade of his hunting knife. "Pretty woman up in my country don't have to do squaw's work, like skinning out and packing home meat," he remarked, walking to the fallen deer. "Man's job, we call that."

There followed a period of tight-lipped neutrality on the girl's part and absorbed concentration on Tom's while he dressed the buck and swung the carcass into a tree crotch. "Now, Mam," he said after shouldering his heavy pack again, "if you'll give me a little boost with this meat, I'll tote it home for you."

All hostility had vanished; only amazement was left in the look she gave him. "You'll carry a hundred pounds of meat on top of that?" she gasped, pointing to his pack.

"Maybe just to show off," he smiled, settling the deer high on his shoulders. "Well, where and how far? Can't hang around very long or I'll sink up to my knees in this rock I'm standing on."

She stepped back a pace and deliberately studied him. He endured it without so much as changing the alertness of a single muscle in his tall body. But inwardly he was frowning at himself for not taking time that morning to shave off a two weeks' stubble of soft, blond beard. When their eyes met, he made no attempt to conceal his growing admiration for this slim, beautiful girl who roamed dangerous forests alone.

"You talk like Luke Mathias," she commented with a head toss that did not make it clear exactly who was the subject of her unspoken displeasure.

Getting settled under his load and

catching up with the smooth flowing stride of his companion prevented Tom Underwood from saying anything further until the trail turned sharply and a small settlement appeared, sunlit, in a clearing. There was a large two-storey log structure surrounded by a stockade. Clustered about it in the form of a crude but effective military arrangement of outposts were a number of smaller log cabins. A large river—the Wabash, he suspected—flowed past the settlement.

"Must be Vincennes,'" Tom hazarded aloud. "Didn't know I was drifting that far north though."

"You haven't," she advised impersonally. "It's Earlyborough. My father named it after the man who taught him his trade in New England."

As a Lancaster, Pennsylvania, man who had learned his trade among men who were ready to fight any time their reputation as the world's finest gunsmiths was challenged, Tom Underwood made no further comment. He had come to a new country to set up in business for himself. Over eight hundred miles of rough trail he had carried his tools on his back, not that he was without money to pay for a passage on a flat boat down the Ohio, but because he was searching for a likely place to set up his shop.

The location of his shop must fill two important qualifications, so he had thought all along. First it must be in some trading centre where many traders came with their long rifles dropped in the crook of an arm; second it should be a locality without a good gunsmith.

HE GLANCED again at the heavy weapon the girl in buckskin dress at his side was carrying. To his professional eye, its decoration and furniture was the work of a skilled craftsman. However, he did not approve of the design, or rather the copy of a French design of smooth bore military musket. The weapon was obviously muzzle-heavy. That was because of its extremely large calibre—shooting a ball that ran fourteen to the pound, he judged, while his own weapon shot a ball of half that weight.

"My father's shop is that house down by the landing," said the girl.

The path to the second largest building in the settlement led directly in front of a sprawling log structure, in back of which was a crude open shed where several pack horses were tethered. The door and window shutters were through back. From the cross arm of a post out front swung a creaking tavern sign with a crude likeness of General Putnam painted on it.

The tavern was of some particular interest to Tom Underwood as he expected to spend the night there, and, by talking with other wayfarers, to get news of local conditions. While he was looking at the tavern, a tall man came to the door with a copper whisky mug in his hand. Close-set black eyes stared first at the girl and then at Tom Underwood, who returned the stare.

The copper mug went flying back into the tavern. The man strode directly at them.

"Who's this stranger honeyin' up to you, Dorcas?" he demanded with a jerk of a dirty thumb in Tom's direction.

"None of your business, Luke!" the girl retorted. "Get back to your dramming."

"When I'm ready," growled Luke Mathias, blocking the path and resting two large fists on his knife belt. "Stranger, what be your name and business in these parts?"

"Tom Underwood's the name, and my business in my own affair."

Luke Mathias smiled pityingly. "Well, y'are a stranger, handing sass like that to Luke Mathias. Let's have a look at that fancy rifle y'carry."

With cold glints in a pair of grey eyes, Tom Underwood shifted the muzzle

of his rifle to bear directly on a spot between Luke's eyes. "Have a look—right down the muzzle," he invited quietly. "Only just remember to keep your hands to yourself. Set triggers go off sort of easy, I hear."

WITHOUT a word, Luke Mathias turned and strode back to the tavern. Dorcas resumed her pace toward her father's house, and Tom followed. When he had hung up the deer carcass in a lean-to, she said, "Come in the house. You can talk to father while I get something ready to eat. You must be starved, toting that heavy pack since morning."

"Thank you, Mam." Tom smiled gravely and plucked off his coonskin cap with a flourish. "They told me before I left Lancaster that the ladies out here would have no dealings with strangers. They were mistaken."

Dorcas first smiled and broke out in a pleased laugh. "Why, you bow just like Jules the little French fiddler of Vincennes! Father, here's a guest! Tom Underwood from Lancaster—"

"From Lancaster — Pennsylvania?"—Dorcas' father laid down the file with which he had been working on a rifle barrel clamped in a vise at the far side of the room and walked over to greet the newcomer. "I'm Donald Ames of Massachusetts," he announced offering his hand. "Lancaster, eh? Ever hear of a gunsmith down there by the name of Deckerd?"

"Learned my trade in his shop," replied Tom, smiling proudly.

"Good man, Deckerd," commented Donald Ames, becoming a trifle more reserved in his manner. "I've seen some of his rifles that were almost as good as what Earl Thomas of Leicester turned out up my way."

An older man than Tom Underwood might have detected a note of stubborn prejudice in the manner of Donald Ames as he knitted his rusty gray brows while comparing the rifle Dorcas had placed on the bench with the one in Tom's hands. But Tom, intensely proud of the gun he had made with his own hands, saw only the admiring glance of his senior.

"Earl Thomas followed the Hessian models—too large a bore. No speed to the ball, and the devil's own kick when she went off," remarked Tom undiplomatically.

With a swoop of his hand, Donald Ames snatched up Dorcas' rifle and shook it under the younger man's nose. "This is an Earl Thomas model," he almost shouted. "And I'll defy mortal man to show me a better arm!"

"Right here!" retorted Tom, smacking his palm against the cheek piece of his own rifle. "To prove it, I'll shoot you a match. One shot each at twenty rods—winner takes both rifles."

Dorcas, who had slipped away during the first meeting between her father and Tom Underwood, now reappeared in the kitchen doorway. She had exchanged her buckskin hunting clothes of a boy for a full skirt of homespun and bright blue bodice. The heavy silver buckles on her leather shoes tinkled demurely as she crossed the room and pushed the men apart.

"Father—shame! Master Underwood, I forbid you to go further with your challenge." She tossed them both an impartial smile. "Anyway, it's my rifle, and I don't propose to see it lost by a chance shot. One shot means nothing!"

"Make it the best string-measure of five shots to the mark," proposed Tom Underwood, still breathing hard. "I say no Yankee-made gun can hold a candle to our Pennsylvania-made long rifles!"

"Pennsylvania—Massachusetts—pooh!" Dorcas Ames flirted a slim hand in disdain. "You men sound worse than two grannies squabbling over their spinning wheels. To table with you both. I want to get at cleaning the pewter before the sun sets."

Donald Ames ate in dour silence and rose quickly from the table, mumbling that he must get back to his work while there was yet light. Tom Underwood hitched his stool closer to the fire, stretched out his long legs and fumbled absently for his shirt clay pipe and tobacco pouch.

"Not in this house!" warned Dorcas, catching his eye. "You'll have the wrath of the whole Presbyterian church on your head at the first whiff of tobacco smoke. Father's the minister of these parts."

TOM whistled softly and stowed away his pipe. "Maybe I'd better go to the tavern, Mam," he said, rising. "Anyway, I'd like to look over the bed I'm to lie in by something better than candle light. Not squeamish, you understand; but there's a limit. I'm beholden for your vittles. Cooking like yours doesn't pass an unmarried man's teeth too often."

"My name is Dorcas," she reminded him serenely. "In these parts respectable women prefer their Christian names. And as for sending you off to that filthy kennel across the commons yonder, heaven forbid!"

Tom Underwood was about to accept the invitation only too readily when Donald Ames appeared in the doorway. In his hand he carried Dorcas' new rifle.

"Get your weapon," he said gruffly to Tom. "I can no work in peace until yon Dutch monstrosity of yours is put in its place. Come; I've paced off twenty rod."

Still brightly illuminated by the last rays of sunshine, a large shingle loomed with a black spot in its center. Tom Underwood looked to the priming of his rifle and at a curt nod from his host stepped to the firing line. Sharp and clear, though not very loud, came the report as he touched his trigger.

Equally as deliberate, Donald Ames raised his rifle. It bellowed mightily, and the shingle, which had not moved after Tom's shot, spun off the stump and fell to the ground.

"I hope you're satisfied," grunted Donald Ames.

"Not yet," retorted Tom cheerfully. He walked to the shingle, picked it up and returned, handing it in silence to his opponent.

The silence grew prolonged as Donald Ames examined the small hole almost directly in the center of the black mark. The great jagged one made by his own bullet was well toward the middle of the shingle but did not cut the black mark.

"A man with your luck is in league with Old Horny himself," Ames remarked caustically.

Silently, Tom Underwood reached out and took the shingle. He paced off thirty rods, this time, and set the target against a giant beech.

"Light is getting pretty bad," he remarked over his shoulder; then raised his rifle and fired.

Again Donald Ames gazed at the black mark. But this time it was punctured by two holes. "You'll admit now that my first shot was fair?" demanded Tom.

"Ay," admitted Donald Ames in a spiritless grunt. He raised his eyes almost beseechingly. "It would hurt my trade, young man, if this were known."

The report of the shots had attracted the attention of the men in the tavern. A group of them came strolling over with Luke Mathias in the lead. Tom Underwood took the target from Donald Ames

and tossed it far out on the slow moving surface of the Wabash.

"A shootin' match, unh?" inquired Luke, teetering a little uncertainly on his moccasins. He turned a leering smile on Donald Ames. "Been takin' him down a peg, Parson?"

"This is none of your affair, Luke," retorted Donald Ames severely. "Be off, man. And have the kindness to stay away from my house when your wits are fuddled with dramming."

A coarse laugh burst from Luke's lips. "Save your sermons, y'old gray squinch owl, for that gal of yours who runs around indecent in men's trousers—showing her leg——"

HE GOT no further; because Tom Underwood's hand spun him around and administered a stinging slap, full across the mouth. Dazed for a moment, he drew the back of his own hand across his lips and stared at a blood smear. With the scream of an angry animal, Luke snatched out his heavy hunting knife.

There was a sharp report from Tom Underwood's rifle and the knife went spinning. He handed his empty weapon to Donald Ames with a curt nod. "Hold this while I teach this bravado his manners."

"Gouge out the Dutchman's eye for catfish bait!" yelled one of Luke's companions, leaping into the air and clapping his heels together. "Wow! I'm next to take a hand. My pappy left me in a wildcat trap for bait. I come home with two pelts and a 'gator hide! Jump him, Luke, or I can't hold myself!"

Luke Mathias needed no encouragement. He spat his contempt for the tall sinewy figure balanced on the balls of his feet and awaiting his rush. With a bellow of rage he dashed in, fists whirling at the ends of flailing arms.

A fist almost as hard as the heavy forehammer it was accustomed to wield crashed into Luke's jaw and set him back on his heels. He merely flung up his head and laughed, to rush in again.

This time, one of his hairy wrists was clamped in five vise-like fingers. Tom Underwood spun, drew his opponent's arm over his shoulder and, with a heave, hurled Luke over his shoulder.

"Enough!" the hitherto silent Dorcas called out imperiously. "Luke, get up and shake hands with Tom Underwood."

With an effort Luke Mathias rose to his knees, then to his feet. He accepted the hand Tom Underwood held out.

"I'm making a show of this because Dorcas wants it," Luke growled in an undertone. "But if I ever get my hands on you again, you'll make buzzard bait!"

The little red spots on Dorcas' cheeks faded quickly as Luke Mathias and his tavern companions shuffled off in the twilight. "There's something good in Luke, some place," she mused aloud. "But it would try the patience of a saint to find it when the rum is in him!"

Donald Ames quietly handed back the rifle Tom had thrust into the elder gunsmith's hands at the start of the fight with Luke. "And here's mine too," added Donald Ames, lips tightened with restraint. "The fact that the sin of gambling is on my soul is no concern of yours. Take it; you won it fairly."

Just then commencing the reloading of his own rifle Tom Underwood ignored the attempt to settle the wager then and there. Swiftly his hands worked, measuring a fresh powder charge and seating a carefully selected ball which he first wrapped in a greased buckskin patch.

His long ramrod tapped the ball firmly down on the powder. He shook his head. "I don't want your rifle, Ames."

THE red bristles of Donald Ames' beard seemed to stand upright with his sudden blaze of offended dignity. "I'll have you to know, young man, that you can't lord it over me. Take the rifle or I'll throw it in the river—"

It was plucked abruptly from his hand by Dorcas. "The unbearable pride of you men!" she exclaimed with a reproving glance for them both. "Anyhow, it's my rifle."

"Lass—" growled her father sternly, "'tis not the place of a modest woman—"

There was something more than impatience in the head toss that shook a stray lock of yellow hair from her eyes. Dorcas settled her rifle in the hollow of her arm and quelled her father's rising anger with a look. Then with a regal dignity that left Tom Underwood gasping she left them, to walk into the cabin.

"I fear for her," mumbled Donald Ames, shaking his head. "She fears nothing—evil man or wild beast. The heart of a headstrong boy in the body of a beautiful young woman. Ay, there's danger there. Danger."

A short laugh escaped Tom Underwood.

"When I first met her on the trail, I thought the same—beauty and danger! The danger was in her eyes, I thought. I've seen redskins in war paint I'd rather face than risk her anger again."

Donald Ames threw him a look. "We'll speak no more of her." By that time they were at the cabin door and he stood aside to permit his guest to enter first, closing and bolting the door behind them. "I must finish that rear sight," he announced, taking two lighted candles from a rude table and walking to his work bench. "Sit on yon stool and give me the news from the East while I work."

With his legs wrapped around the rough-hewn spindles of the stool Tom Underwood watched the cunning strokes with which a file was cutting a dovetail in a sight base. He had an artist's appreciation for the skill of the other; but detached from that was a young man's intolerance for the older man's slavish copying of the inherent faults of the French and Hessian gunsmiths. He reached out and picked from the bench the newly finished rifle barrel for which the sight was being made.

"Bore and rifle this yourself?" he asked Donald Ames.

The other rapped his file against a wood block to clear the fine chips from its teeth and grunted assent. "Ay, with seven lands and a twist of one turn in four feet."

"A quarter of a rod," mused Tom, translating into a unit of measure more familiar to him. "Too fast a twist, Ames. The bore should be smaller, and the twist one turn in half a rod. It would shoot truer."

The only reaction to that for a moment was a suspiciously derisive squeak from Donald Ames' file. "Man or beast," he finally retorted, "goes down and stays down when a ball from one of my rifles hits the mark." The file was laid aside, with extra care that its hardness did not come in contact with the keen edge of a row of wood chisels on the bench. "I had thought to offer you work," he remarked severely. "At first sight you looked a young man of promise, with enough skill in his trade so that I could teach him the *art* of making fine rifles. But you're too headstrong—no respect for all that only years of experience can give a man."

From the doorway of a smaller room leading off from the workshop came the clear pleasant voice of Dorcas: "Good night, Master Underwood! Don't keep father up too long squabbling over guns!"

Tom glanced up just in time to catch her fleeting, almost mocking, smile and the picture of her framed in the dark doorway with a lighted candle illuminating a face of breath-taking beauty. That one look confirmed a half-formed intention. He smiled. But she had already gone.

"Too bad, sir," he remarked, picking up the thread of Donald Ames' remarks.

"Ay. Too bad," agreed the other noncommittally.

"For you, I mean," added Tom Underwood dryly. "Two gunsmiths with differ-

ent ideas working in one shop looks more sensible to me than those same two in separate shops — cutting each other's throats for what trade there is."

A ponderous frown was turned on him. "You're my guest for the night. There'll be no hard words over this till morning. From then on it's each for himself. There's a bear skin yonder by the fireplace when you're sleepy."

II

IT WAS a good month after his first meeting Dorcas Ames on the trail before Tom Underwood had finished his one-room log cabin. There had been much to do in the way of constructing a small water-wheel which was to furnish the power for blowing the bellows of his forge and drilling rifle barrels.

But even after he was ready to commence building rifles there was delay. The bars of iron for welding into rifle barrels, which he had ordered from a trader in Vincennes, had not yet arrived. The few jobs of repairing a lock or welding a broken frizzen spring left idle time on his hands. And, although it was getting late in the fall when fur was growing prime, he refrained from hunting except to keep himself supplied with meat; for the trappers would be quick to resent his competition.

Then, one day, in walked Wo-han, the son of a chief of a friendly tribe wintering on an island four miles downstream. The warrior unceremoniously tossed a rifle—or the remains of one—down on Tom's work bench.

"Fine long gun," he declared. "What give for him?"

An appraising eye ran over the cracked stock. The cock and frizzen were missing, and the barrel was completely caked with mud and rust. To a less discerning eye the single word "Deschert" stamped on the barrel would have had no significance. Tom picked up the rifle and tried its balance. It was there—all the perfection which that master gunsmith whom his neighbors called Deckerd was there.

Tom reached up and took down a three-tined fish spear which he had forged from odds and ends picked up around the settlement.

Wo-han laughed scornfully. Tom added three fishhooks, but still his customer refused to even glance at the price offered. Finally, he added a small skinning knife which he had forged and tempered from a piece of rusted file.

Wo-han made a swift grab and fled to the doorway with a taunting laugh. With a shrug Tom picked up the broken rifle and started taking it apart to see what was of salvageable value about it. He had made a poor bargain, he admitted to himself. It was just the reverence he had for the name Deschert that had prompted him to give valuable goods for a worthless object. Still, there was a certain amount of pleasure in stripping off the broken stock and scraping the grease and rust from the lock parts.

With nothing better to occupy his time, he cleaned the rifle parts carefully with wood ashes and a wet piece of buckskin. Among the parts he had brought with him in his pack he found a serviceable cock and a frizzen. He let the examination of the barrel go to the last, hoping that it might not be too badly rusted to prevent him from reboring it to a large size.

It was not until he had unscrewed the breech plug from the barrel and had inserted an iron rod that he discovered the barrel was plugged within a half inch of the muzzle. One brisk blow with a mallet on the rod ejected the obstruction. The rod came out coated with congealed bear's fat. Several passes of a cleaning patch, soaked in lye-water, through the barrel was enough to clean it thoroughly.

One look through the bore brought a low whistle to his lips. Except for the rusted spot at the very muzzle, he was peering through a gleaming barrel as

bright and clean as the day it had left Deschert's shop.

TWO days after that, Luke Mathias strolled across the commons and leaned his powerful arms on the open window sill where Tom was working on the rifle. Luke watched him a long time in sardonic silence before speaking. "Wouldn't believe hit," he finally cackled. His obvious derision getting no response, he leaned over and tapped Tom's shoulder. "Met Wo-han down the river a spell ago—fishin'. I couldn't figure out how in 'nation he got them right peart hooks he was usin', till he flaps his wings and crows he done skun you in a trade. Legged it right up here to see the foolest white man in the Northwest country—and thar you are!"

Tom shrugged. "Glad Wo-han is satisfied. I am."

Luke chuckled in high glee. "Well, if

this don't beat a leg offen an iron kettle!" He patted Tom consolingly and with much condescension on the shoulder. "Sonny, them red varmits'll never steal from you! No, sir—they'll jest trade you stark nekked in no time. Why, Wo-han and his buzzard-nosed old pappy has been tryin' to trade that there piece of rust to Donald Ames for jest one hunting knife, goin' on three years now!"

Let Luke and the hangers-on around the tavern have their fun—serenely Tom Underwood went about his business fitting a new curly maple stock to his Deschert rifle. He cut and tempered a new cherry with which he made a bullet mold for the rifle; then slipped down to the river to test its accuracy.

He took with him his almost priceless horn of Curtis & Harvey diamond grain powder. Conserving every grain lest he spill some, he measured out a charge and seated a bright new lead ball in its greased patch. He fired five shots at the target he had set up exactly a hundred and twenty paces distant. Then with rifle reloaded, he walked up to see the result.

But just as he got close to his target the bow of a canoe swung to the bank and a lank woodsman in a greasy coonskin cap stepped out. With a long rifle clasped in his left hand, and as much a part of the man as his hawk-like nose or powerful hand that picked up the flat piece of wood Tom had used for a target, the stranger examined the target shrewdly.

Then with a grunt, he waved Tom back to the firing point.

"That's shootin', brother," announced the stranger with a nod to Tom. "That's as plumb center shootin' as I've seed since old M'riar's day. Now let's see what I kin do—"

The brisk crack of the tall woodsman's rifle rang in the frosty air. He reloaded with a swiftness that brought a gasp of admiration from Tom Underwood and fired again. After his fifth shot, he marched up to the target and examined it minutely.

"Brother," he said over his shoulder, "there ain't no which nor what about where your balls hit and mine." Which was a fact perfectly obvious to Tom who was peering over the other's shoulder. The ten shots had completely demolished the center of the black spot on the board. The stranger rose to his full height and smiled broadly. "Brother, I'll bet ye a stack of beaver skins higher'n your rifle I can name the maker of that there rifle, first pop. D'ye go me?"

Tom took one swift look at the long rifle in the other's hand and shook his head, smiling warily. "It's no bet,

Stranger. A man who carries a Deschert knows too much!"

GREAT brown fingers patted the silver-inlaid stock in the crook of a mighty arm. A twinkle came to the keen eyes studying Tom Underwood.

"That's Dutch for Deckerd, Brother," the stranger informed him. Then with a courtesy only a man of natural dignity can muster, he offered his own rifle to Tom. "Jest hold my Betsey for a spell and let me heft that'n of yours."

Tom complied, taking an immediate liking to this man who so gracefully avoided such a crass breach of etiquette as that of asking another to disarm himself at a stranger's behest. The inspection continued long in silence. Puzzled wrinkles gathered on the stranger's brow. He sat down on a log, fingering the rifle inch by inch and speaking softly to himself.

Once, Tom heard him say, "M'riar?" and then answer his own doubting question with a firm headshake, as though attempting to force himself to believe the contrary of some unspoken hope.

"I got that rifle from an Indian," Tom explained with a touch of pride. "It was the most worthless looking piece of pot metal you ever laid eyes on till I knocked the plug from the end of the barrel and bedded it into a new stock—"

"Was there bar's grease in the bore?" the stranger suddenly asked.

Tom nodded. "Chuck full—all but the last half inch. I cut that off."

"M'riar, I knowed you all the time!" chuckled the stranger. He rose slowly and placed a huge hand on Tom's shoulder. "Finder's keeper's, Brother," he said, handing back Tom's rifle with a regretful sigh. "I was prisoner onct among the hostiles around these parts. Had to leg it without old M'riar. I plugged her and threw the cock into the river. Jest couldn't stand thinkin' of no varmit usin' her."

Tom hesitated a moment before saying. "Take it. It didn't cost me much, and I'm glad to return it—"

A dark frown swept over the stranger's face. "See here, Brother," he growled, thrusting his jaw close to Tom's face. "By tarnation, I'm of a mind to whop the daylights outta you—tryin' to give *me charity!*" He paced back and forth angrily, clinching and unclinching his hands—eyeing the rifle on Tom's arm and muttering to himself in some Indian dialect. Finally he went to his canoe and flung out a bale of beaver skins—then another, and a third. "Three hundred dollars in gold thar!" he announced with a sweep of his arm. "Will ye trade?"

Tom handed over his rifle with a smile. "It's a go, Dan'l Boone. I'm a gunsmith and every rifle I own is for sale—"

The stranger blinked. "Brother, how'd ye know me?" But without waiting for an answer, he reached out and took the rifle which Tom held forth. "M'riar, ye purty little wench!" he chuckled, patting his new possession. He reached out and trapped Tom's hand with a mighty squeeze. "Brother, what's your name? I'm agoin' to carve it on my powder horn— No. Here, take this—" Daniel Boone unslung a perforated silver medal suspended inside his hunting shirt and dropped it over Tom's head. "If you're ever in a fix and can't come yourself, send this to me and I'll come a whoopin'."

"Tom Underwood's the name," he got back with a broad smile.

"All right, Tom," nodded Daniel Boone, stepping back into his canoe and with a shove sending it out into the current. "I'll pass the word along where to find the best gunsmith in tarnation. Kaintuck included! The boys'll come swarmin' to ye!"

Such praise and such a promise from the greatest rifleman west of the Alleghenies meant even more to Tom Underwood than the three bales of beaver pelts he carried back to his cabin. Boone would stick to his word, and sooner or

later tall hunters in fringed buckskin would be looking through the settlements along the Wabash "For that Tom Underwood, Dan'l 'lows makes them dandy rifle guns."

BUT it was almost two weeks after that before the trader and fleet of long canoes came. Tom heaved a bale of beaver pelts to his shoulder and walked down to the landing. Dorcas Ames was there too, chaffering with much good-natured laughter with one of the trader's assistants for a bolt of calico and some gay ribbons. Much as he wanted to speak with her, Tom hurried on to the canoe where the chief trader was unloading some heavy bundles.

"Powerful sorry, Donald," the trader was saying in his brisk clipped speech as Tom dumped his bale of furs to the ground. "You've been a mighty good customer of mine, I'll admit, but half of them bars of iron goes to young Tom Underwood. I promised 'em to him."

Donald Ames wagged his great shock of rust red hair streaked with gray. "All iron landed here is mine, Morgan, this five years. Have I ever beat you down in price or failed to pay in gold?"

"N-o," admitted the trader reluctantly. "But lookee, Donald. I've brought twenty bars—double what y've ever used in a year!"

"I'll take them all," said Donald Ames abruptly. "Quick with the unloading—"

"Hold on there, Morgan!" called Tom Underwood, striding up. "Ten of those bars are mine, and I'm here to claim them."

A threatening growl rumbled in the chest of Donald Ames. He raised his clinched fist and shook it under Tom's nose.

"Be off, you interloper! What right have you making guns, anyway?"

"As much as you," retorted Tom. "Perhaps more. You sound like a British redcoat drill sergeant the way you order people around. You've got your iron. Now stand clear!"

"A deal's a deal," said Morgan the trader with an apologetic shrug to Donald Ames. "If Underwood has the money—"

"Gold, it must be," snarled Donald Ames. "No credit, understand?"

Morgan looked at the bale of beaver pelts on Tom's shoulder and shrugged. "——or beaver, Donald. I reckon my profit in beaver when all's said and done. Let's have a look at your pelts, Underwood."

DONALD AMES withdrew in a towering rage, to stand with folded arms at a distance, scowling fiercely. Tom slipped the buckskin thong and unrolled his pack. It was the first time he had seen them himself, such was his faith in Daniel Boone's honesty.

"Throw out any that are not prime," he suggested as the trader silently fingered each pelt in turn. "I've got two more bales at my cabin."

"Two more, grading as good as these?" asked Morgan alertly. "Fetch 'em and I'll buy the lot." He waved to his trade goods piled on the beach. "Anything here is yours—or I'll give you a due bill and deliver next spring with the first canoes coming up after the ice."

Tom pursed his lips dubiously. "I'll think that over—"

"I'll grade these as one and a quarter pelts each," Morgan bargained. "I don't mind admitting, man, that they're the finest I've seen. No Indian peeled these, I'll warrant." He hurried back to his canoe and lifted a heavy bundle. "Look—a ninety-pound anvil. Best cast steel face, sir. Rings like a bell on a frosty night."

That was too much for Tom Underwood to resist. He delivered all his pelts, accepted a due bill for two hundred dollars from Morgan and shook hands.

"Don't lose that," Morgan warned him,

smiling. "Astor himself will pay you in gold on it—no Continentals, mind. St. Louis, Montreal—any place where trade is down you'll find Pierre Morgan's fist on a due bill outranks the King's treasury. That's because I'll pay in gold, beaver or tobacco as the holder chooses."

His trading completed, Tom Underwood backed away and prepared to carry his goods to his cabin. But straight in his path stood Donald Ames, red beard bristling and his cold blue eyes flashing with indignant anger.

"Where does a man who has never sold a rifle get all these pelts?" he demanded in a loud voice. Other men of the settlement gathered at the landing stopped their bartering and edged closer. "Answer that, Master Tom Underwood. Where did you get 'em?"

"Been a'wonderin' myself," chimed in Luke Mathias. "Been a'scratchin' my ear and wonderin' where my best huntin' knife went to so mysterious like—"

Emboldened, Donald Ames seized Tom by the arm. "You don't leave so fast, my young friend."

A rush of hot blood surged to Tom Underwood's ears. He flung Donald Ames aside, caught the heavy anvil under one arm and swung the bundle of rifle barrels to his shoulder. It was a tremendous load, but he stalked on up the path unmolested. There was not another man present who could have equalled the feat. There was none who dared challenge the man who could.

An hour after that he was too absorbed in fastening his new anvil to a short section of up-ended beech log to notice when Dorcas Ames came to his cabin door.

"You bully!" she flung at him scornfully.

He halted a heavy hammer in mid-air and laid down the long spike he was about to drive home.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You struck my father—a man almost twice your age!" she accused bitterly.

He shook his head. "No, I pushed him out of my way. I didn't strike him."

"You lie!" The intense passion of her accusation flamed in her eyes. They turned from blue to a deep green and seemed to emit barbs of scorn that bit into his flesh. "You—you baby-stabbing Hessian!"

Suddenly, his own anger burst forth: "Clear out! I've had enough of you arrogant Ames tribe for one day."

She drew herself up proudly. "Go ahead and strike me too! You're capable of it."

Slowly, he looked her over from the tips of her tiny beaded moccasins to the crown of her yellow braids gleaming in the late afternoon sunshine. He smiled sardonically.

"Your father publicly accused me of being a thief. Now you come to call me a liar." There was a sternness in his eyes that made her shrink back a step. "I have nothing to explain—nothing to be ashamed of. But you—"

"I saw him fall," Dorcas said in a choked voice. "Luke said you broke his arm with an iron bar!"

"What?" roared Tom Underwood, aghast. "I broke your father's arm?" Nothing—nothing that Tom could think of carried more woeful import than to hear that he had broken a man's arm. There was no doctor within a week's journey. Even then it was the knife more often than not. What could a one-armed gunsmith do at his trade? He passed his hand across his brow. "I—I—you say his arm is—broken?"

"Broken," said Dorcas in a dry sob. "No one else knows what to do. I came to—to ask you to—to—"

TOM UNDERWOOD shook his head, stunned, groping to collect his senses. "I don't know what I can do—what I can do," he repeated. "I can fix a broken gunstock—but a human bone."

He reached out and picked up his draw knife and two flat pieces of soft wood. "I'll try. Do what I can. Maybe it isn't really broken. Maybe—"

To see Donald Ames lying there on his bed and glaring up at him with the hatred of a wounded creature for its captor almost completely unnerved Tom Underwood.

His fingers skilled in the shaping of wood and metal explored the swelling on the hairy forearm. He could feel the splintered bone grate. A groan escaped his patient

"Brace yourself, man," he said to Donald Ames.

He gripped the thick wrist in one hand and closed over the tensed biceps with the other. His own muscles bulged as he pulled and twisted the broken arm. "It's back in place—I hope." he muttered to himself. "Hand the splints, Dorcas. Now a strip of cloth — and now the thongs." Gently as possible, he flexed the broken arm and laid it across Donald Ames' heaving chest. "As a praying man," he remarked soberly, "you'd best be at it, for that's the first bone I've ever set."

Donald Ames wet his dry lips. Already the feverishness in his eyes had slackened somewhat. He nodded slowly. "What you've done, you've undone," he said in measured words. "I know good work—there's a feel to it not to be doubted. I'll be back at my bench tomorrow. There's a rifle I must finish for Joe Tonnerre before he comes. I promised it."

Just then Dorcas tiptoed back into the room, a question large in her eyes. "Do you think—"

"Dorcas, lass," said her father, motioning her closer. "It was the sin of covetousness that has fallen as a curse upon me. This young man—wild and headstrong, as he is—is no thief. I was wrong to say that."

"But he struck you!" exclaimed Dorcas bitterly. "I'll never forgive him for that. Never!"

Her father turned his head on his pillow. "I was standing in the path of a free man, lass. He had a right to push me aside. He did not strike." With his uninjured hand he gestured that he would like to be alone.

A week went by. Then two weeks. Every day Tom walked to the Ames cabin and examined the splints on Donald Ames' arm.

"I can at least hold a chisel in it," argued Donald Ames.

"Not yet," said Tom Underwood, shaking his head. "We must wait."

"Ay, but will Joe Tonnerre wait for his rifle?" growled the patient. "I've counted on that money to buy flour and tea for the winter."

TOM could only shake his head as he left Donald Ames sitting in the great settee at the fireplace with his arm in a sling. Dorcas, as usual, had managed to avoid him today. He closed the door behind him and trudged off through a light fall of snow toward his own cabin.

"Ah, M'sieu! M'sieu, one moment. One instant, M'sieu!" Tom stopped and waited for a stout little man bundled in furs with a scarlet sash around his middle to overtake him. "Does M'sieu, by any chance, have the distinguished honor of being a friend of LeGrand Voyageur?" he demanded breathlessly. Then seeing the puzzled look on Tom's face, he spread out his hands and laughed. "I refer to my fren' Dani-el Boone! Comprehend me?"

"You must be Joe Tonnerre," Tom blurted out.

The little man swept a deep bow. "At your service, M'sieu. You flatter me that my fame is known to utter strangers. *Non,* I mean not that, for you are a respected fren' of my fren' Le Grand Voyageur of Kaintuck! What a name that —it sounds like a sneeze, eh?"

"Well, Mr. Tonnerre," said Tom, suddenly becoming grave, "I suppose you've come to get your rifle Donald Ames was to make for you."

The little man shrugged discreetly. "One must keep one's word," he murmured apologetically. "Yes, I have come for the rifle I ordered made before my fren' Dani-el tell me of you. Now I wish to also order one from you. Next spring you have it ready?"

They had reached Tom's cabin by this time. He pushed open the door and ushered his guest in, then walked to the bench and picked up a newly completed rifle.

"You have heard about Donald Ames?" he asked quietly.

"So sad," sighed the little man. "I'm afraid my rifle won't be ready. *Ah!* What's this? Behold and regard, Joe Tonnerre!" he warned himself aloud. "You are looking at one fine rifle. May I take it in my hands?"

They were the hands of an expert, a connoisseur of firearms that took the rifle from Tom. And after giving due time for a close inspection Tom asked, "What do you think of it?"

"This is art, M'sieu!" exclaimed the little man patting the rifle. "A man's soul went into the making of it. You will produce a model of this for me, eh? Price—pouf! Ask what you will. If I haven't that much, I'll rob the treasury at Quebec for the balance! I'm an honest man, M'sieu. Yes! But only so long as my eyes are not on a thing like this."

Tom drew back his hand as the other, with a reluctant sigh, offered to return the rifle.

"It's yours, Mr. Tonnerre. The price is exactly what you agreed to pay Donald Ames—"

With tender reverence the new rifle was placed carefully on a place on the bench which the little man dusted off with the end of his sash. Then he whirled and seized Tom by the shoulders and kissed him resoundingly on each cheek.

"Merci! Thanks one million!" he spluttered. "No! Yes! Oh, my heart thumps. I am crazy—a dream. For the love of heaven, M'sieu, wake me gently. But the price? No, one thousand times,

I insist!" The little man dug inside his many folds of fur clothing and extracted a heavy bag of gold. "One hundred—one fifty—two hundred—"

"Hold on, there!" exclaimed Tom Underwood, suddenly closing his fist. "One hundred was the price Donald Ames agreed."

"Pouf!" exclaimed the little man excitedly. "Me, I pay as much more as I damn please. I insist two hundred, otherwise I refuse to take charity. *Attendez!"*

There was nothing to do but accept the money. Tom shook hands with his customer and stood at the door, waving and shouting back replies to repeated adieus as the little man trudged off into the forest. Two hundred in gold—not to count the soul-refreshing compliments of a man who really understood fine workmanship—was a price Tom had never dreamed of getting for a rifle.

But the intoxication of it eventually wore off, leaving him with the haunting thought that he had taken advantage of another man's misfortune. Donald Ames was the man who should have sold that rifle to Joe Tonnerre. "Would it have been as good a rifle as mine?" he argued with himself as he sat brooding in front of his fire. The food on his table stood untouched. The heavy gold coins —an odd assortment of French, Spanish

and English—stood piled in four rows in front of a short candle.

Finally, he rose to his feet and walked to the door—letting in a fine sifting of dry snow as he stood there staring out into the night. Down closer to the river, he saw a faint yellow light gleaming through a thinly scraped and oiled deerskin stretched across a window of Donald Ames, cabin.

There could be only one explanation for that—Donald was working on Joe Tonnerre's rifle in spite of his broken arm.

THOUGHTFULLY he gathered up the gold coins and dropped them into a pouch. He stepped over to lift his own rifle from the pegs in the wall but withdrew his hand. It was only a step or two to the Ames' cabin.

The dry snow crunched under his moccasins as he strode across the clearing, to rap loudly on the Ames' cabin door.

"Who's there?" called Dorcas from inside.

Tom was about to answer "A friend" but the word stuck in his throat.

"Speak up. Who knocks?" demanded a deeper voice.

There was a dull thump of a rifle butt being lowered to the floor as Tom answered, "Underwood. I saw your light. I have news."

The sound of heavy oaken bars being removed from the door followed. The door swung open and Dorcas Ames stood silhouetted in candle light. "Come in," she said aloofly.

Tom glanced toward the work bench, where Donald Ames stood covering his entrance with a rifle barrel resting on the splints of his broken arm. The rifle was put down with an obvious sigh of relief.

"Joe Tonnerre was at my cabin," announced Tom, drawing his pouch from his belt. He counted out a hundred dollars and stacked them on the bench before Donald Ames. "He said he couldn't wait. I sold him a rifle."

There was an indignant sniff from Dorcas standing behind him. He heard the swift whisper of her moccasins across the puncheon floor and the bang of her bedroom door closing behind her.

Her father raised his eyes, thoughtfully stroking the splints on his arm. "Ay," he said slowly. "He paid you well, I see. As much as even I would have got."

Embarrassed, Tom Underwood shifted his eyes from Donald's and nodded toward the gold. "That's your share. I couldn't sleep for thinking I was the cause of your losing a customer."

A suspicious frown gathered around Donald Ames' eyes. "Have you been dramming?" he demanded sternly. He got back a slow head shake for an answer. With a single sweep of his hand he gathered the gold and held it out. "Thank ye kindly. But parched corn and jerked venison taste better than charity to me and my daughter! We can do without flour and tea till I've finished this!" He slapped the almost finished rifle in his vise. "Take back your money, Underwood."

Tom folded his arms and pulled in his chin. "No. I'll take the rifle you were making for Joe Tonnerre."

With a shrug, Donald Ames turned back to his vise. After a light touch of a file here and a tap of his hammer there, he finished the rifle and handed it over. "I make 'em to sell," he said in a deep rumble. "Your money's as good as the next man's. But it's a clean bargain, mind. You're no buying the right to court my Dorcas. Understand?"

Silently, Tom accepted the rifle and turned to the door. He did not hear Donald Ames call after him that he had forgotten to clamp a flint in the cock. He followed his recent tracks in the snow to his own cabin, angrily cursing himself for the slowness of his tongue.

He had just reached for his own latch string when a blanket was flung over his head. Powerful hands pinioned his arms. His rifle was wrenched away and heavy thongs bound his arms before he could defend himself.

The cold point of a knife pressed significantly against the back of his neck. "Keep mouth shut and no get hurt," came a guttural warning.

The strong stench from the blanket over his head told him he was the captive of Indians. He obeyed the sharp tug of the thong binding him and commenced walking. Each of his pinioned arms was in a powerful grasp that served not only to prevent his escape but to protect him from stumbling over the rough trail he was soon traversing.

"Now make all loud noise you can," suggested a sardonic voice not entirely devoid of humor as the blanket was whipped from his head.

HE LOOKED about him and found he was in the center of a tight group of seven or eight warriors of Wo-han's tribe. The fact that their faces were not daubed with war paint was faintly encouraging.

The warrior with a knife in his hand touched the point of it to his shoulder and motioned for the march to resume. "Even while Stone Eater accepts from his white friends the wampum belt of peace, his braves make war!" Tom flung at them. "Bah! With the coming of snow, snakes with two tongues should be in their holes."

His bitter tirade was accepted in a silence as cold as the frosty night. On they marched until at last they crossed the ice to the island where Wo-han's tribe was camped for the winter.

When he stepped inside the largest tepee, he found it well lighted with small torches of pitch pine. The bonds were whisked from his arms.

For a moment he stood there, rubbing the circulation back into his arms and watching two old squaws working over a man lying on a pallet of deerskins. Suddenly a statuesque warrior on his right flung back his blanket and raised his right hand.

"Welcome to the lodge of Stone Eater," he announced striking his own chest. He turned to the two squaws ministering to the warrior on the pallet and gave them an order in their own tongue, at which they rose and departed from the tepee. "You make Red Beard's arm well with magic," he said, turning to Tom Underwood. "Wo-han—my son—work your magic on him. I pay many beaver. Make you blood brother of my warriors."

"But I'm no doctor—no medicine man," Tom Underwood objected.

Stone Eater withdrew his other hand from under his blanket and displayed a tomahawk with which he pointed toward Wo-han. "Make magic. Now!" he commanded sternly. "A white man has broken my son. A white man must mend my son. My son die. White man die too."

It was useless to argue. Tom Underwood knelt beside the injured Wo-han, examining the ugly but superficial bruises and abrasions about his head and shoulders. They had been caused by brutal blows—of a steel-shod rifle butt more than likely. His exploring fingers moved on down the rigidly tensed body. Not a sound escaped his patient until his hands touched the right hip joint. Then a tremor, and a suppressed grunt escaped those tightly drawn lips.

The hip was too badly swollen for him to tell whether it was broken or merely dislocated.

"Wolf Lip did this thing," said Stone Eater in a deep voice vibrant with anger.

Tom Underwood shook his head to say that he did not recognize the name. One of the warriors tapped him on the arm and proceeded to do a shuffling step

across the tepee, protruding his lip and leering in a startling caricature of Luke Mathias.

Immediately, Tom took heart. Luke was a famed wrestler. Stories of his terrible leg-and-shoulder hold were well known far and wide—and how, after allowing his victim to remain in agony for a day or two he sometimes returned to restore the dislocated hip joint to its socket.

Tom sat down at Wo-han's feet and motioned for two braves to seize the patient's arms. Then bracing his feet against theirs, he pulled on the injured leg. He could feel the flesh under his fingers writhe in agony, yet no sound came from the injured man. Harder and yet harder he pulled.

Then, suddenly, there was a sharp thump that traveled down the leg bone in his grasp. He released his tension and leaned over to gently flex the knee of his patient.

"Cover him well. Keep him so for two days," he announced, rising to his feet. "It was no break."

EVEN while he was prescribing for his patient, Wo-han thrust aside the warriors' hands lowering him to his pallet and sat up. Then gingerly he rose to his knees; then to his feet. With scarcely a noticeable limp he strode back and forth across the tepee floor.

A smile broke out on his bruised lips. "Good!" he said to Tom Underwood, and immediately lay down again and pulled a robe over his shoulders.

At some look or silent gesture of command from Stone Eater, the warriors who had brought Tom Underwood from the settlement fell back, leaving an open lane to the tepee doorway. The meaning of it was so plain that he took an involuntary step toward it, as though getting back to his cabin was the thought uppermost in his mind.

"Hold!" Stone Eater held up a delaying hand as he waved with the other for one of the warriors to return Tom's rifle. With the eyes of an eagle, the Indian chief detected the absence of the flint from the cock. His brow darkened with a majestic indignation that Tom had never seen upon any white man's face but General Washington's.

Tom pointed at his rifle and shook his head. "It is new. No flint has been fitted to it yet," he explained.

Stone Eater thrust the weapon into his hand. "It is well. My head would be forever bowed in shame if one of my people had stolen it." With a sweep of his arm he indicated a pile of beaver pelts by the lodge entrance. "Take." Tom stooped and lifted a single fine pelt from the pile, only to meet Stone Eater's eyes blazing with outraged dignity. "Only one?" he demanded. "Does Strong Hand count the life of my son so cheap?"

Tom threw the skin over his shoulder and did some quick thinking as the other braves crowded in, flinging angry exclamations at him. This might be merely a display of custom, he tried to tell himself. Then again they might be genuinely insulted. On the other hand he knew that if he accepted anything beyond a token of nominal value that every other village of the tribe would feel free to command his services as a mender of broken and dislocated bones, with no more ceremony about kidnapping him than Stone Eater had displayed. Inevitably an occasion would arise when it would be demanded of him to cure a warrior beyond hope. What would happen in such an event, no white man cared to contemplate.

He pointed to Wo-han now peacefully sleeping. "If Wo-han died, how many beaver skins would bring life to him again?" he asked.

The cloud of anger vanished from Stone Eater's face at once. He waved back his warriors crowding around Tom Underwood. "The lips of a young man

speak with the tongue of the old and wise," he said. "But it is strange talk no white man has spoken to my people before. Always the white man reaches out his hand. Takes more—more—more. Some day my people will say 'You have taken too much!' . . . The white man will load his long gun. The red man will make war. Kill all white men. All but you, Strong Hand. Go! I have spoken."

Once more outside the lodge of Stone Eater, Tom Underwood took a deep breath and started off at a slow trot for the settlement. He had not traveled a hundred rods before he was aware that his old escort was on his heels. He stopped and waved them back.

Their leader advanced, shaking his head and walking two fingers along his smooth-bore musket stock. The unmistakable meaning of the movement of his fingers was that of a man stalking cautiously. Then he raised his hand to his eyes and peered left and right.

Tom Underwood nodded and struck off toward the settlement again. Not a word had been spoken, but it was plain that he was being guarded against enemies of whom he had no knowledge. Was it some hostile tribe which had invaded the hitherto peaceful valley? As to that he could not say.

At his cabin door he turned to wave adieu to his escort. But they were already gone—vanished even beyond the keenness of his hearing to detect the sound of a single twig snapping under the powdery snow. He reached up to take the beaver pelt from his shoulder, and found when he brought his hand down that in some unaccountable manner it had been changed to an otter skin, beautifully dressed until the thick fur shimmered in the silent starlight, like some priceless fold of rich velvet.

It was a harmless enough joke Stone Eater had played on him; yet he found himself wondering, chagrinned, what Daniel Boone would say if he knew about it. Beneath it all there was something chilling—ominous—in its portent. It served to drive home the proud claim of the Indians; that no white man was their equal in silent coming and going through the wilderness.

BEFORE doing anything else, after entering his cabin, Tom fitted a flint to the rifle he had bought from Donald Ames. Then he loaded and primed it. With his own rifle across his knees, he sat down on a stool by the rifle port in his door and kept watch through the night.

Day broke without so much as the sound of an owl disturbing the silence. One by one the chimnies of the settlement sent up bluish spirals of wood smoke as embers were stirred and fresh wood thrown on to cook the morning meal.

He yawned and tossed off the blanket covering his shoulders and took a live coal in a pair of tongs from his own fireplace to kindle his forge.

He ate a breakfast of cold roasted squirrel and ash cake as he pumped the bellows of his forge with his foot. Soon he wisked a heated flat bar, white-hot, from his forge and began welding up a rifle barrel. He had a primitive though effective way of welding a flat bar into a round one with a hole through its center. First he curled over the very end of the bar; and as he brought it out from the fire the second time ready for welding, he inserted a short, hard steel rod in the curl.

A dozen swift strokes of his heavy forehammer closed the seam for a matter of three inches around the cold steel pin. A couple of sharp blows on the end of the pin drove it out of the welded hole in the barrel he was making. Then, while the heat was still in his work, he curled the unwelded flat bar in a spiral continuation of the hole. As soon as the partly finished rifle barrel was again at welding

heat, he inserted the steel pin and repeated the welding process.

Toward noon he had made the last weld. But before placing the barrel in the snow outside to cool, he tipped it up to the light and squinted through the hole made by the steel pin. Naturally the hole was neither perfectly round nor as straight as it must be before it would shoot accurately. He took a long steel rod with a tempered drill point on the end of it and carried his rifle barrel out to the low shed behind his cabin where his water wheel and drilling bench stood.

The tiny spring-fed brook which supplied power for his water wheel had not yet frozen over. Using the still warm barrel, he broke the ice in the forebay, then mounted the drill and rifle barrel in position and gave the wheel a little spin to start it going. A tiny trickle of water ran down through the top end of the barrel for the purpose of cooling the hard drill point already starting to cut minute grain-like chips of iron from the other end.

Satisfied that the drill was working as it should, he started back around his cabin to the door. Standing there, gazing into the interior, he saw a gaunt figure in briar-scarred deerskin hunting shirt.

"Howdy, neighbor." The stranger looked at him with a pair of eyes deeply sunken in their sockets. In his hand he held a long rifle with part of the lock missing. "Heered below, some place or tother, there was a gunsmith in these parts. Be you the man, Smith?"

"I'm the smith," admitted Tom Underwood, pushing open his door. "Come in where it's warm. Had a bait of vittles today yet?"

The gaunt backwoodsman fingered the broken lock of his rifle and smiled dryly. "Not today; ner fer three, four yesterdays, I reckon. Not since my gun lock got smashed when I jumped offen that thar high bank."

TOM waved toward the fireplace "There's a flitch of bacon hanging there, and some batter in that covered crock under the crane. Light in and feed yourself while I work on your rifle."

"My name's Amos Bowman—frien' of Dan'l's, you might say," volunteered the stranger as he set a slice of bacon to broiling and dabbed a lump of corn meal batter on Tom's fire shovel and held it over the coals. In spite of his great hunger he waited patiently for his meal to cook, munching slowly at the bacon while the hoe cake was browning. "Good thing I got here when I did," he remarked, deftly flipping the hoe cake into the air and catching it on the point of his hunting knife, to blow lustily on it before breaking off a piece and popping it into his mouth. "Great day in the morning, yes! I was gettin' to feel as servigious as a catamount. Ever felt that way, Smith?"

"Tom Underwood's the name," Tom answered with a chuckle. "Whack up another bait for yourself. There's plenty."

"Later, mebbe," said Amos Bowman, licking the last shine of bacon grease from his finger. "Go throwin' a big bait into an empty belly and y'go tangle-footed all to a sudden." He rose—and kept on rising, it seemed to Tom—until he towered inches better than six feet above the tattered soles of his moccasins. His slate gray eyes had to turn slightly downward to meet Tom's. He nodded at the lock undergoing repairs. "Got her most fixed, hain't ye?"

Tom added a drop of oil to the lock and handed back the repaired rifle. "All done, Bowman. Just happened I had extra parts on hand to fix it. Otherwise, it would have taken me the better part of a day to make and temper a new frizzen spring and flint jaw. If you want to test it, step to the door. There's a mark on a stump out there I use."

The door swung back. Long ragged arms raised the rifle and fired. Then without walking out to the stump to see where the bullet had struck, Amos Bowman reached in his belt and took out a handsome hunting knife which he extended handle first to Tom.

"Ain't got no beaver ner any hard money, Smith, to pay ye. Will ye call it squar fer this?"

Tom took the knife and tested its edge on his thumb. The fine steel sang under the pluck of his thumbnail. He nodded and laid the knife up on a shelf, then looked at Amos Bowman searchingly. "How about it—got another knife to make with till you get where you're going?"

"No. I can always tear and chaw though, onct I've downed my meat with this," replied Amos Bowman, running a hard hang along his rifle stock.

"Take this along then," said Tom, handing over a smaller knife. "I haven't polished the blade yet and the handle is still in the rough. But the temper is good and you can shave with it."

His gaunt visitor drew back, offended. "Didn't ask fer boot, did I?" he demanded.

Tom leaned over and slid the knife into Bowman's empty sheath. "One beaver skin, it'll cost you next time you're by this way."

That was greeted by a somewhat mollified sniff. "Smith, ye'll die pore as a gutted snowbird," he was informed testily. "Yup, and git the biggest funeral on the Wabash, trustin' ragged strangers thisaway." He moved to the door and paused with his hand on the wooden latch bar. "I circled the trail of a war party, two days north of here," he remarked casually. "None of my business, but the folks around here look too tarnation safe-feelin' t'be sure of keeping their hair, Smith."

BUT there was no calling the man back to obtain further details of the threatened attack by Indians from the north. Tom Underwood rushed to the door and shouted after the lank figure vanishing into the woods at a swinging trot.

As soon as he was certain Amos Bowman would not turn back, Tom hung his powder horn and bullet pouch over his shoulder and caught up his own rifle and hurried to the tavern. When he pushed open the door the rank odor of spilled whisky and rum smote him like a blow in the face.

Bob Tweak, the tavern keeper, looked up from his task of sousing battered copper mugs in a firkin of murky water and waved a cordial fat hand. "Howdy, Tom. You missed the big doings here last night. Better late than never, though. What'll it be?"

"Where's Major Barkings?" Tom asked.

Bob Tweak winked slyly and jerked his thumb in the direction of the small blockhouse and stockade. "Still sleeping it off. Him and Luke didn't leave here till after cock crow. You missed it, Tom. The major was buyin' for everybody. Whoopin' her up over the news that Congress passed the Ordinance of Government for the Northwest Territory. That gives him clear title to nigh onto fifty square miles of land hereabouts. Say—"

Tom hadn't waited to hear the rest, but was already out the door, racing for the stockade.

"Who's yar?" grumbled a sleepy challenge from behind the barred gate in answer to his loud knocking.

Another voice, thickened by lack of sleep, though still meticulous in its accent, snapped out, "John! How many times have I told you the official challenge should be, 'Who is yonder there'? Now repeat it correctly."

"All right, Major," grumbled the challenger. "Who's yar—hell, what's your business, outside thar?"

"Hoosier! Hoosier!" snapped the voice of Major Barkings. "Open up, John and let him in. That's Tom Underwood. I can tell by the way the gate is shaking."

As soon as he was admitted, Tom strode into the lower room of the block house to find Major Barkings seated on a bale of trade goods, yawning as he buckled his shoes.

"Morning, Tom. *Arugh!* Your pardon, sir. Up a bit late last night. Where were you, by the by?"

Ignoring the pleasantry, Tom lowered his rifle butt to the floor and said, "A Kentucky man by the name of Amos Bowman went through here this morning. He had news that—"

"Amos Bowman of Maysville? I know the rascal," broke in Major Barkings. "Dirty and ragged as ever, I suppose? And peddling another one of his war-party scare stories?"

Tom Underwood stared hard at Major Barkings for a moment. Although he was a total stranger to the major, the major was no stranger to him. At least not his reputation. Back in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, there had been ugly talk among the returned veterans of the Continental Army. Tales of a wagon trader who had charged fifty shillings a pair for cheap rawhide boots during the retreat from Valley Forge. This man was Potifer Barkings, opportunist—war profiteer—scheming politician—private banker to General Benedict Arnold, rumor had declared.

"After what I've seen, and what I've heard, Major," said Tom Underwood, "the day will never come when I fail to pay heed to news of danger and treachery. Yes, Amos Bowman did have news. He crossed the trail of hostiles, two days to the north."

Major Barkings returned a sharply questioning look. "See here, young man, who else have you told this?"

"You're the first," answered Tom shortly. "But if you won't believe it, I'll keep on telling men till somebody pays attention—and *acts.*"

"Pure rubbish!" grunted the Major, jumping down from the bale of trade goods and pulling the wrinkles out of the sleeves of his small coat. "We're as safe here as in Philadelphia." He nodded confidentially to Tom Underwood. "Safer, perhaps. I've got a private little treaty of my own with Stone Eater. The grasping old fox gets a keg of rum twice a year from me as the price of keeping the other savages from trespassing on my grant. A thief to catch a thief—understand?"

"No, I don't," retorted Tom grimly. "I saw hostiles scalp my uncle when I was eleven, and I've been in too many fights with 'em since to ever sleep again with both eyes shut. If you don't believe—"

"Hold on—" Major Barkings reached out and caught Tom's sleeve. "I'm in charge here, my young hotspur—duly commissioned by Congress. Peddling scares like this is bad for business. You're a gunsmith, aren't you?"

"From Lancaster," answered Tom shortly. He shook his sleeve free from the major's detaining grasp. "I think I see what you're driving at, Major. You don't want any hostile scares keeping new settlers off the land you have for sale."

MAJOR BARKINGS accepted that as a compliment to his astuteness. "Exactly! And I believe you're smart enough man to see my strategy—the more settlers, the more rifles we will have to buy to defend ourselves." He waved his

hand in a gesture that almost seemed to include the entire Northwest Territory. "The sooner we get this region populated with men ready and willing to fight for their homes and families, the quicker we'll drive all these savages from the face of the earth! Think of the hundreds of new rifles they will be buying from you, sir!"

"I'm thinking of the blood of innocent women and children that will be on your head!" Tom Underwood flung back over his shoulder as he strode from the block house.

Much as he disliked carrying tales, he started off across the commons to Donald Ames' cabin on the river bank. He proposed to lay the whole story before him —even to the rumors about Major Barkings he had heard back in Pennsylvania. The need for haste drove him on, unaware that Luke Mathias was following in his footsteps.

"Hold hard, thar!" Luke called out, at the same time clapping a big hand on his shoulder. "Is thar so dinged many white men in this country you can't pass the time o' day with one of the best?"

Whatever else Tom considered Luke Mathias to be, he knew the man for a shrewd Indian fighter of abundant animal courage. A plan formed swiftly in his mind. Just the barest hint of adventure would tempt Luke to join him in a scouting trip to the north. If they found no hostile sign, then there would be no sense in stirring up the whole settlement with false warnings of an Indian raid.

He was about to suggest this when Luke pointed to Tom's own foot tracks made in the snow the night before.

"I'm askin' you somethin' you won't be able to lie clear of," he announced truculently. "What do them tracks of yourn mean—headin' for an comin' back from that Injun camp below here?"

"You ought to know," Tom answered abruptly. "I went down there and put a man's hip back in place—Wo-han's." He gave the grinning Luke a cool stare. "They'll lift your hair for the beating you gave that boy, Luke."

Luke grinned even more broadly. "You're atalkin' with your head in a barr'l. Thar ain't nothin' a white man can do to make an Injun any meaner. Anyways, young Wo-han got no more'n any man—white or red—what I ketch sparkin' Dorcas Ames. She'll be my woman or she'll die without ever droppin' a brat—"

For a moment there was a silence broken only by Tom Underwood's breath whistling in through his clinched teeth. He laid aside his rifle and knife and turned to Luke Mathias. "Do the same! One of us is going to get the beating of his life."

"I figgered that ud rouse ye!" chuckled Luke, laying his weapons aside. "Thar won't be no woman to stop *this* ruckus!"

THAT first surge of hot resentment had already cooled within Tom Underwood. In its place had come a chill which settled in the pit of his stomach as he waited for Luke's first rush. He hated this clawing, kicking and gouging style of backwoods fighting that usually ended with one or both combatants more or less disfigured for life. Nevertheless he stood his ground, his powerful shoulders balanced well forward over the ball of his left foot.

Luke rushed at him, a grin of savage pleasure twisting his mouth. Tom took a terrific blow on his shoulder without retaliating. That blow shook him to his heels, at the same time releasing an explosion of fighting instinct much like the reaction of a finely tempered and powerful steel spring.

Twice he rocked Luke's head with alternate blows to a hard jaw that felt as unyielding under the collision of his knuckles as a weathered beech log. Then Luke's right hand clawed down the side of his face, leaving three raw furrows

and rolls of torn skin flapping against his cheek.

All reluctance was gone now. Tom seized the offending hand and started twisting it, oblivious to the blows Luke was launching against his bowed head. The tendons in both men's arms strained as pressure of one hand and resistance of the other increased. Slowly—imperceptibly at first—Tom felt the muscles resisting his begin to wilt.

A wave of exultation swept over him. He knew now that he was the stronger man in spite of Luke's superior weight and his fame as a rough and tumble fighter.

Quickly, he broke his hold and dealt Luke a bruising smash on the mouth.

His antagonist fell back a step, pausing to hitch up his buckskin trousers and lick his bleeding lips. But the fighting grin was still there as he dove at Tom's middle. They both crashed to the frozen ground, each struggling for a mastering wrestling hold on the other.

Tom could feel a mighty forearm bulge under the bend of his knee as Luke began applying his dangerous leg-hold and hip-wrenching lock. For a moment he feared that his slight advantage in strength over his antagonist was at the mercy of superior cunning.

He was far too occupied with struggling to break Luke's hold to realize spectators had gathered and were enjoying the fight until he heard a cackling laugh, and, "Tear his leg off, Luke! I kin use an extry ham."

Luke rolled his head to one side and called out, "Watch this, fellers! I'm agoin' to give him what that Injun got—"

But Luke made a mistake in saying that; for Tom, in spite of the excruciating pain of a tortured hip joint, buried his disengaged knee in Luke's groin and drove inward with all his power. That broke them apart. He rolled to his feet and whirled too quickly for Luke, whose breath was coming in whistling gasps, to regain his balance.

In a flash, he had both of Luke's feet off the ground, and in spite of his writhing and kicking Luke was hoisted higher and higher. With a face blanched by white anger, save for the scarlet smear down one cheek, Tom staggered closer to a low stump. The other backwoodsmen watching the fight gasped with genuine horror as they understood his intention to break Luke's body across that stump.

"Stop! Stop or I'll shoot!" Tom, still with Luke held over his head, turned to see Dorcas Ames threatening him with her rifle. "You beast!" she cried. "Put him down or I'll shoot!"

With a great heave Tom flung Luke to the ground at Dorcas' feet. The body thudded soddenly and lay still. "If you want him, take him," Tom said, and turned to gather up his rifle and knife belt.

He did not give so much as one look at Dorcas kneeling in the snow with Luke's inert head in her lap, but strode back to his cabin and barred the door behind him. It was incomprehensible to him that as beautiful and sensitive a girl as Dorcas could love a coarse rum-swilling braggart. And yet she had made her choice; the dullest could see that.

TOM gasped with pain as he peeled off his hunting shirt and stripped to the waist, ruthlessly cutting away the strips of loose skin Luke's long nails had clawed from his cheek and bathing the wound on his shoulder made by Luke's teeth. Then, rolled in his blankets, he lay down in front of the fireplace and fell into a deep sleep of utter physical and mental exhaustion.

How long he had slept, he did not know. But he was aware that he was upraised on one elbow, listening intently for a repetition of a single drumming blow against his heavily timbered door. He was not sure that the sound had been

real and not merely part of an ugly dream.

With a series of grunts for each stiff and painful muscle that flexed as he stood up, he dressed and opened his door. The stars were growing pale in the sky—the hour before dawn; when the black rim of the forest surrounding the white-carpeted clearing was submerged in a brooding silence. Nor could he see any movement which might account for that single blow on his door.

The iron hinges creaked shrilly as he started to swing the door closed again and shut out the biting cold. It was then that he saw an arrow imbedded in it. Quickly he jerked free the arrow, slammed and barred his door. A handful of curled birch bark tossed on the red embers of his fire provided the light by which he examined the sinister object in his hands.

It was a war arrow, not one made for hunting game. Of that he was certain after the first inspection. But why had it been shot into *his* door? Certainly no hostile Indian would be that foolish in attack—to forewarn an unsuspecting enemy. He studied the fletching and the chipped-flint head. A Sac or Fox war arrow. Certainly not a Shawnee or Miami. Stone Eater's people were of the Sac-Fox confederation. Wo-han was the son of— The meaning suddenly became as plain as though a written message lay in his hand.

The warning Amos Bowman had given him was now confirmed by Wo-han's arrow. That hostile war party from the North was no false rumor but a grim truth. Dawn was the choice hour of attack for all Indians.

In a bound he was at his door. It swung back on its hinges and he darted to his anvil.

Clang! Clang! Clang! the heavy forehammer beat out its alarm. And again: *Clang! Clang! Clang!* louder and more rapidly this time. After a short interval, he stepped to the door and fired shots from his two rifles; then slammed and barred his door again, sliding back the rifle port in it and peering out.

A questioning shout echoed from Donald Ames' cabin. Its question was repeated from across the commons and echoed again by some one in the tavern. But the block house inside the stockade remained silent.

Just then Tom fired at a moving blur near the stockade. The wild death cry of a Shawnee warrior rose even before the echo of the rifle had died away. A puff of smoke burst from a rifle port in the shuttered window of the Ames cabin. Tom's range of vision was limited.

For the moment he was trying to catch over his sights the illusive target of a warrior slipping from tree to tree. He did not dare turn his eyes to see what was making that lurid red glow on the snow.

He fired, and missed. And as he reloaded swiftly, he saw a tongue of flame rise from the roof of the block house. The crackle and roar of flames increased in volume. He continued firing at lurking shapes approaching the fourth side of the Ames cabin from which no firing had come. Three rifles couldn't protect all four sides.

He had been grimly wondering for some time how long it would be before burning embers from his own roof drove him out into the open, when it gradually dawned on him that at least one rifle inside the Ames cabin was protecting him even as he was protecting them.

AS FULL daylight came, the besiegers grew more wary. Their fire arrows fell short, and the balls from their crude smooth-bore muskets thudded harmlessly into thick log walls of the settlement cabins. . . . Gradually the attack subsided to an occasional shot and a mocking war whoop. There was another night coming, when fire arrows would again be

far more effective than a long-range rifle even in the hands of an expert marksman.

This was no new experience to him, this fighting to defend a settlement, and he knew the end was not far off unless a messenger got away to summon help. Perhaps of all the defenders he was in the best position to do that. It was just a few rods to the ravine behind his cabin, and once within its shelter he felt confident he could break through the besiegers' lines.

Vincennes was the nearest large settlement which could be counted on to supply men for the rescue. It was some two days hard traveling up the Wabash. Having never been there himself, he had only a hazy idea of what trails should be used going there in winter. The ice was not yet thick enough to bear a man's weight and yet would prevent using a canoe.

But what if he left with the best intentions in the world, and then returned to find the settlement a desolate ruin of burned cabins? Who would believe that he hadn't run away to save his own life? Could he even convince himself, afterward, that he hadn't run away—deserted the others and their women and children?

He couldn't do it. That conviction gripped him as strongly as though he were bound with chains. But he could do something else—a ruse that Boone and Simon Kenton both had successfully executed. And that was to slip out after dark and mingle with the attacking Indians, striking silently from the black shadows. A Shawnee brave dies here—another yonder on the high bluff—across the clearing, another dies without a cry as a hunting knife is driven between his shoulder blades. All night long, silent death stalking the attackers until their superstitious belief that evil spirits are fighting for their white enemies suddenly overwhelms them with panic. It had been done. It was worth trying again.

All day long Tom Underwood kept his vigil at one rifle port and another of his cabin, but darkness began to settle over the hushed forest without a shot being fired. Then the mocking, quavering cry of an owl floated down from a high bluff. The illusion of peace and safety was broken.

He pulled on an extra hunting shirt, adding another knife to his belt and pushing the handle of a tomahawk alongside of it. Then, moving like a shadow, he dropped out the window nearest the ravine and darted silently into the brush, rifle at trail. An hour later he wiped the blade of his tomahawk with a handful of dry leaves and slipped it back into his belt. The owl on the bluff would cry no more.

He circled back to the edge of the clearing, confident that somewhere close to the Ames cabin that he would find Shawnees creeping up to discharge their fire arrows. He moved with a deliberation that was maddening to himself; because of the thought that while he was protecting the Ames cabin the others on the far side of the clearing were being threatened by fire arrows also.

He took another step, flattening against the trunk of a hollow sycamore. The opening was large enough to conceal a man, and he backed in, to wait and watch for enemies trailing him.

There came a low chuckle behind him. "Keep yore hair on, Tom!" whispered warm breath on his neck. "It's Luke. Seen you sneak out. I been waitin' for you."

The horror-chill which had paralyzed him for an instant fell away. Tom let

out his breath in a long sigh. "Man! Ten years was cut off my life just now. Luke, what are *you* doing here?"

"Same as you," grunted Luke. "Puttin' the fear of Tarnation into these varmints. Got two. How many you get?"

"One," answered Tom; then squeezed Luke's shoulder in the darkness. "Hush! What do you make of that low sound out there?"

"Stop squeezin' that shoulder you blame near busted yesterday," grumbled Luke. "That yowling and bangin' on a war drum, y'mean? They're makin' medicine. Lost too many braves in the first rush. Fixin' to stay out of range and starve us out, I reckon. Mebbe a fire arrer or two onct in a while. You say you done for that sentinel on the bluff?"

"Yes."

"We kin move around to 'tother side of the clearin' then," was Luke's opinion. "Couple owls answered from over there, and owl-huntin's my fun tonight."

THE amazing stealth of the man he was following left Tom wondering if he were not following his own shadow cast by the thin crescent of the moon. At one place Luke whispered "Don't move," and vanished. He was back again in a short while, tucking a scalp under his belt. "Three already!" he chuckled deep in his throat.

A fourth scalp dangled from Luke's belt when he and Tom crouched in a thicket and shared a handful of parched corn between them. Dawn was breaking.

"How long will it take you to reach Vincennes, Luke?" asked Tom in a guarded undertone.

"'Bout a hundred years," retorted Luke with a broad wink. "I ain't welcome in them parts. Slapped a little half-breed wench too hard fer sparkin' with a flatboater when she was wearin' my beads." He spat out a grain of hard corn, grumbling, "Tarnation! Never knew before, a woman's neck wa'n't no stouter'n a jaybird's—"

"You mean—you mean, she died?" gasped Tom horrified.

Luke nodded callously. "'Course, if she'd been white, I'da jest whopped her with my belt like I was married to her."

Tom had to avoid the frank stare Luke was giving him, because it was impossible to hide the contempt and loathing he felt. "Since you daren't go to Vincennes," he began slowly, "then I'll go. Where do I pick up the winter trail?"

Luke waved eastward. "Head up that creek till it spreads out in a beaver meadow. Far side, and y'll strike an old game trail. Keep a'beltin' along that at a swing trot—don't let them side trails lead you astray—and then y'll hit the main Salt Traders trail leadin' smack dab into Vincennes. With good wind, y'll make it come sunup this time tomorrow if you don't stop trottin'."

Tom shook his head. "I'd have to camp at night, because I don't know the trail." He rose and nodded down to Luke. "I'll start now. Do the best you can to keep the settlement fighting till I come back with help. I'll try and send some ahead on horses—"

Luke jumped to his feet and grabbed him by the arm just as he was about to turn away. "I'll go," he said grimly. "I'll slip in there afore sunup and git a tavern keeper I know to spread the word. Got anythin' on you to scratch a message on. Can't write myself—"

"Yes, this—" Quickly Tom unslung the silver medal from his neck that Boone had given him and turned it over and with his knife point commenced scratching a message.

"Le's see that thing," demanded Luke, plucking it from his hand and turning it over again. "Where'n tarnation did y'get this?"

"Boone gave it to me," Tom answered, wondering at the look of awe on Luke's face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothin'," answered Luke with a broad grin. "With this in my paw I can strut right up to the biggest man in Vincennes and spit in his face, and he'll thank me fer it! Yes sirree, and nary a redskin from here to the Ohio'll dare lay a finger on me wearin' this around my neck. 'Feared Boone'll ha'n't 'em!"

TOM watched Luke Mathias trot off with Boone's medal banging against the throat of his hunting shirt, then turned south toward Stone Eater's winter camp. There was a slim hope that he could persuade the chief of the Sac band to join him in an attack on the Shawnee war party besieging the settlement. At any rate, it would do no harm to try. Furthermore, it was necessary with the coming of full daylight for him to withdraw far enough from the clearing so that Shawnee scouting parties could not surprise him. His work was done until nightfall returned. Unless Stone Eater was willing to help.

At the edge of the strip of ice separating the Indian village from the river bank he came to a halt in full view of a band of Sac hunters returning with their game. Two braves strode up to him. One snatched away his rifle. The other took his hunting knives and tomahawk. He offered no resistance, and obeyed their curt sign to march between them across the ice to the village.

Stone Eater, seated before his lodge fire, greeted him with a brief nod when he entered, guarded by the two warriors. A curt sign restored Tom's weapons to him.

"Strong Hand is welcome," said Stone Eater, pointing to a seat on a blanket. "Stone Eater wonders. Strong Hand is not fighting with his white brothers?"

Tom Underwood remained standing, arms folded across his chest. "You have called me brother of the Sacs, Stone Eater," he said.

"Strong Hand is a brother," acknowledged the Sac chief gravely. "He has mended Wo-han. What he asks as a brother shall be given as a brother."

Tom chose his words carefully. "Stone Eater has exchanged wampum with Red Beard the father of the yellow hair girl. That is a sign of peace and friendship. Red Beard needs your help to drive back the Shawnee war party who want scalps."

Slowly, Stone Eater arose and with majestic gravity shook his head. "The Sacs and the Shawnees are not at war. They are my brothers. You, one brother. They, many brothers. Stone Eater does not fight his brothers." He sat down again and gathered his ceremonial blanket around his shoulders. "Strong Hand has not eaten. Let him stay while the women cook food."

Although rebuffed in no uncertain terms, Tom sat down and remained silent while he tried to think of a more persuasive argument that would induce Stone Eater to at least intercede with the Shawnees. He looked up suddenly, to find Stone Eater watching him with deep-set, serious eyes.

"Stone Eater," he burst out with all the earnestness of his desire showing on his face, "do you realize what will happen when the Shawnees destroy the white village? I'll tell you! They will boast of their power. They will march down here and order Stone Eater and his people from their good hunting grounds."

The faintest flicker of admiration shone in the Sac chieftain's eyes before they grew cold and passionless again. "Strong Hand speaks half true. But he forgets Stone Eater has more braves than the Shawnees. Shawnees are far from their council lodge and must return for food and arrows, five days journey. Stone Eater's heart is heavy when he sees his white brother fighting many red brothers. His braves will not fight the Shawnees. I have spoken."

Broiled venison on a strip bark was

placed before Tom Underwood by one of the squaws. He ate in silence, deeming it wise not to incur the open enmity of Stone Eater who sat motionless with his blanket gathered around his shoulders, staring with a reserved expectancy at the entrance of the lodge. He could not help but think as he glanced from time to time at the strong copper colored face of the chief of the Sacs what tremendous power of will lay behind that massive forehead. Those dark brooding eyes never seemed to be concerned with the present—always peering into the future in a way that left Tom with the uncomfortable feeling that he, as a white man, lacked some sixth sense which Stone Eater commanded with the same facility that he commanded his eyes or his ears to serve him.

"Has Strong Hand seen the trail of Wo-han?" Stone Eater suddenly demanded. "Before the sun rose Wo-han and two young braves went to the beaver meadow to kill a deer."

Tom almost dropped the bone from which he was hungrily gnawing the last shred of meat. That was the route Luke Mathias had taken. . . . There was a blood feud between him and Wo-han. As cold blooded a killer as Luke would not hesitate to kill any "varmint" as he classed all Indians—much less pass up a chance to dispose of Wo-han.

"Young men have hot blood," went on Stone Eater, sardonically ignoring Tom's sudden discomfiture. "Quarrels mean more than the duties a hunter owes to his village."

Tom turned and faced the chief squarely. "It is bad medicine that Wo-han took the trail to the beaver meadow," he said bluntly. "Wolf Lip also took that trail before the sun was three fingers high."

A cold flame kindled in Stone Eater's eyes, but the expressionless mask of his face did not change so much as a line. "It is bad. Strong Hand did well to speak the truth. He must go before the hunters return. Strong Hand's life would be in the hands of the hunters if another white man has slain Wo-han. It is the law of the tribe. Stone Eater could not protect him."

Tom reluctantly rose from the soft blankets and took up his rifle. "Stone Eater has fed me when I was hungry," he said deferentially. "Strong Hand will not forget, though he goth with sorrow that his friends the Sacs refuse to help drive back the Shawnees."

With a look of genuine regret Stone Eater gave his tribal sign of farewell. "Strong Hand's trail leads to Vincennes?" he suggested meaningly. "One rifle can do nothing against the Shawnees."

Tom shook his head. "The Shawnees will take my scalp along with the scalps of my friends. It is the tribal law of the white man."

"Strond Hand speaks from a brave heart. His lips will not cry when the Shawnee fire burns him."

The certainty gripped Tom Underwood that he was returning to the settlement only to meet capture and death at the Shawnee burning stake. He knew all the details of the fate awaiting him only too well—hours of being bound to the stake while hideously painted warriors flung their tomahawks into the post a scant inch above his head — blood curdling screams in his face while scalping knives were brandished in unspeakable gestures—slivers of wood driven into his flesh. And then the fire.

With his jaw clamped shut, he strode out of Stone Eater's lodge and started across the ice to the mainland. Within ten feet of the willow thicket running down to the bank a band of Sac hunters appeared. In their midst was a Shawnee brave in full war paint. He still bore his weapons, a sign that he was not a prisoner.

At the sight of Tom, the Shawnee's eyes blazed with implacable ferocity. In

a motion as fast as a steel spring, he whipped out his tomahawk and flung it at Tom's head. The blade glittered in the cold sunlight as it whirled once over and flashed edge foremost. Tom dodged and went down on one knee. The Shawnee, with all the killing lust of a wild beast, rushed at him with an upraised scalping knife.

By that time the Sac hunting band was in a turmoil. A musket snapped close to Tom's ear but misfired. Gathering his feet under him he sprang at the Shawnee and gripped both wrists, lunging into his antagonist breast to breast. Then slowly he bent the writhing knife wrist inward, feeling the resisting tendons cracking under the strain.

A Sac warrior's tomahawk was whirling for a downward blow when Stone Eater commanded: "Hold!" He strode across the ice and flung a stern look at his own warriors. He struck apart Tom and the Shawnee, motioning Tom to his left hand which was nearest the willow thicket. "Is the Shawnee a mad wolf?" There was grim irony in his question that bit even deeper when he added, "Your arm is too weak to bear weapons of a warrior. Throw them down!"

MEANWHILE, Tom had picked his rifle from the ice, struggling to maintain an air of unconcern in the face of the threatening attitude of the Sac warriors encircling him.

Just then the Shawnee warrior flung down his weapons and spat on the ice before breaking out in an angry harangue.

Tom understood only a word here and there, but the Shawnee's gestures conveyed the news that Luke Mathias had slain a Sac warrior. The Shawnee came to an abrupt end, pointing at Tom and then flinging back his head to laugh mockingly.

Stone Eater's face was ashen gray as he turned to Tom. "He says Wolf Lip has slain Wo-han," he said through lips almost as graven iron.

Prepared as he was for bad news, Tom caught an almost imperceptible change of expression in Stone Eater's eyes. "Go!" they said as plainly as shouting.

In a bound he was into the thicket, scattering Sac braves left and right with the sweep of his arms. He mounted the bank and raced off through the forest, spurred by the blood-cry of the pack on his heels. After the first dash of a half mile or so, he slowed down and looked back over his shoulder. His pursuers were tiring. They had already hunted a full day while he had been eating and resting. One by one they hurled a vengeful shout after him and turned back. A musket ball or two rattled harmlessly through the tree tops as the chase was abandoned.

But he continued on a steady trot, circling wide to penetrate deeper in the forest. Ten miles from the Sac village, and almost an equal distance from his own cabin, he paused for rest. For the last two miles he had been trotting over the bare ice of a small stream, and now he realized that he must be on the creek that led to the beaver meadow.

The sun had settled low in the west when he again stepped out of his hiding place and started toward the settlement. His progress was slow, for he picked his way along the ridges and logs of fallen trees which the wind had swept bare of snow. It was growing dusk when he paused at the echo of a distant rifle shot. Another followed. Then a rapid succession of shots, that gradually died away to intermittent firing. Breathless, he stared in the direction of the settlement —waiting in vain for the pink glow in the sky that would give the final ghastly news.

It was almost dark when he moved on again, eyes strained to read the tracks in the snow. A mink had killed a partridge

by a small spring which hadn't frozen over yet. The dragging track of a wild turkey suddenly ended in a blur. Instinctively he raised his eyes to a dense beech and saw the dark mass of the roosting bird vaguely silhouetted against the pale sky. His thumb crept forward to his rifle cock, but he did not draw it back. This was no time to be hunting. He was the hunted.

Another track in the snow brought him up with a jerk. Three warriors had passed that way, headed back toward the Shawnee camp. He followed for a short distance, studying the two outer pairs of tracks and knitting his brow as he puzzled over the strangeness of the tracks made by the warrior who traveled between the others.

Queer—all three warriors had walked close together. Then where the leaves were churned up, he read the answer. The two outer warriors were escorting a prisoner to camp! Not Luke Mathias; for the moccasin prints of the prisoner were too small for that.

He combed the disturbed leaves in the trail with searching hands and pricked his finger on the point of a short hunting knife. He brushed off the blade and held it close to his eyes. But it was too dark to confirm to him what his fingers already suspected. The shape of the handle was familiar. But it was the faint, even marks of file teeth, which he had not ground completely away when he forged that knife from a broken file, that told him it was the knife he had traded to Wo-han.

Wo-han was not slain, as the Shawnee had said! He had been taken prisoner by the Shawnees as part of a cunning plot to incite Stone Eater's braves to join them in an assault on the settlement. That much was as near a certainty as Tom dared guess. He pushed on, continuing to follow the trail of the Shawnees and their prisoner while he thought out a plan of action for the night.

MIDNIGHT found him chilled and stiff from standing motionless in a dense pawpaw thicket close to the war camp of the Shawnees. The embers of a small cooking fire gave insufficient light for him to distinguish the features of a small group resting with their backs against trees. They were not sleeping, because each man in turn had arisen to make a circle of the camp before returning to his resting place.

Tom counted eight vague forms. Seven had already made a brief scouting trip, and he was waiting for the eighth to take his turn. Another rose, instead, and vanished noiselessly into the forest. That meant the eighth figure was the prisoner the others were guarding.

Hope died. The stealth of Daniel Boone Tom told himself, would fail in an attempt to slip in there and cut Wo-han's bonds. Those guards were as restless as a nursing panther guarding her litter.

Suddenly two other Shawnees appeared near the fire. One of them threw a small handful of twigs on the fire. It blazed up for an instant and threw a ruddy glow over the faces daubed with war paint.

One of the two arrivals Tom recognized as the Shawnee who had attacked him at Stone Eater's village. The other was undoubtedly the war chief, a man of powerful physique and a face of ruthless intelligence. He issued a curt order that was obeyed instantly by the guards springing to their feet. They jerked the prisoner upright, and Tom could see that Wo-han's ankles were bound together by a strong rawhide rope which was loose enough for him to hold the slack in his hands bound behind him and walk with a fairly unrestricted stride. It was obvious, however, that an attempt to run away on the part of the prisoner would cause him to drop the rope which would quickly become entangled in the underbrush and trip him.

The Shawnee war chief made a disdainful gesture of his hand that was more intelligible to Tom Underwood than his contemptuous words: "Is one youthful Sac warrior to be guarded by seven Shawnee braves?" their chief seemed to demand. "Two are sufficient. You others get back to your braver comrades fighting the white settlers!"

Five of the guards slunk away. The chief pointed north and issued another command, and the two remaining guards prodded their prisoner into motion and started off with him. As there had been much loud talking and considerable stirring about, Tom had no difficulty in slipping out of his pawpaw thicket and trailing the guards and their prisoner.

A mile or two north of the war camp, it became apparent to him that Wo-han was being marched to some place remote from all possibility of discovery by his own people. The cunning Shawnee chief was taking no chances that his scheme to induce Stone Eater to join the attack might fail. Which in itself was more than a hint to Tom that the Shawnees were not strong enough in numbers to carry the settlement by assault.

Into a dense growth of willows led the trail Tom was following. Not far ahead were the Shawnee guards and their prisoner. He could hear the brush moving and the impatient growls of the guards as they demanded more haste from their captive.

Far more noiselessly than they, he glided forward at a quickened pace, the thong of his tomahawk looped over his wrist as he grasped its handle. The opportunity came unexpectedly, when he almost stumbled over the rear guard stooping in the trail to untangle Wo-han's ankle rope which was caught in the brush.

There was a grisly crunch as the blade bit home. Tom was still trying to wrench it free when the other guard sprang on him. It was a case of both fighting shadows in almost total darkness. A Shawnee scalping knife ripped through his hunting shirt and left a hot streak throbbing under the writhing arm Tom instantly clamped against his body. The Shawnee tried to withdraw his knife arm, his hot breath hissing in Tom's face as he snapped his teeth viciously. Muscles hardened with long hours of labor at the forge strove with the violent power of the Shawnee warrior. Then the end came.

Tom cut Wo-han's bonds with a still dripping hunting knife and whispered, "Steady, Wo-han! This is Strong Hand."

He received a silent squeeze of gratitude on the arm. Then Wo-han provided himself with weapons from the dead Shawnees and said, "Come. Others will be following. It is the Shawnee war custom."

They struck off at right angles to the trail, moving slowly while Wo-han rubbed circulation into his arms. On the top of a windswept ridge they stopped. "Can you make it safely back to your people?" Tom whispered.

"Strong Hand come too. Stone Eater's heart will be glad to see him," urged Wo-han.

"No," retorted Tom grimly. "Strong Hand goes to find the Shawnee war chief. If he dies, the Shawnees will run away."

"Strong Hand is mad. He throws his life away," grumbled Wo-han sadly. "I go. Tomorrow the Shawnees will be driven out like wolves. Come and rest in Stone Eater's lodge till then."

"No," repeated Tom. "The Shawnees will strike again tonight."

Cold sweat broke out on his forehead as he turned back toward the Shawnee

camp, leaving Wo-han to vanish deeper into the forest on his return to his village. The flap of his hunting shirt was already slippery from the bleeding of his side where the Shawnee's knife had wounded him.

HE CREPT almost to the edge of the clearing and lay still. The dark mass out there in a white patch of snow was Donald Ames' cabin. Inside were Dorcas and her father, hollow-eyed from their ceaseless vigil at the rifle ports. He had been through sieges like that himself. He knew the maddening strain of incessant watching—the crushing apprehension as the besieged waited expectantly for that first choking whiff of smoke and the ominous crackle of burning shingles, fired by a flaming arrow. So far the snow on the cabin roofs had quenched the brands hurled on them. But the wind was rising, and bare places were appearing on the roof of the Ames cabin.

His heart almost stopped beating at the sound of flint scraping against steel. A fire-arrow was being ignited. He squirmed closer. A ruddy glow flickered on the shaft of a tow-wrapped arrow the Shawnee chief was hastily drawing with his bow.

Tom's rifle bellowed. In a bound he cleared a writhing body and dashed toward the Ames cabin, shouting, "Open the north window! Dorcas! Donald! It's Tom Underwood!"

An arrow whirred past him. A streak of orange flame burst from the cabin and the impact of a heavy lead ball slammed his own rifle stock against his chest. Another arrow struck him in the fleshy part of the thigh, but there was no time to break the shaft and pull it through.

He was at the shuttered window now, beating against it with his hands while he dodged the rifle barrel jabbing downward at him. A tomahawk thudded into the logs close to his head and a rifle roared almost in his face. He whirled with his back to the cabin and clubbed his long rifle, dealing a smashing blow at a Shawnee rushing in with a knife in one hand and a burning brand in the other.

A second rifle bellowed over his head, and another Shawnee collapsed even as he drew his arrow to the head. Tom felt his strength run from his limbs like water. Even the stars turned black.

The next thing he knew he was lying stripped to the waist under a warm blanket. His eyes were open, but he could see nothing. Suddenly the long wailing cry of a hunting wolf-pack drifted into the cabin. He staggered to his feet.

Then the strained voice of Donald Ames came from the darkness:

"Have you my pistol by you, Lass?"

"Yes, Father."

"Keep it well primed. No matter what happens to me, I will stand it knowing those devils yonder never got their hands on you."

All was blackness. Tom groped for his rifle. The wolf-cry came again from another quarter. And yet another. Donald Ames was thrusting a rifle and powder horn into his hands. "If ye can stand," he said gruffly, "guard the rifle port to the south."

"What signal was that I just heard?" Tom whispered.

"A war party of Miamis have joined the Shawnees, I've no doubt," replied Donald Ames.

PEERING through his rifle port, Tom could see that dawn was breaking. If the final assault came, it would come before there was light enough to see rifle sights. Another long, wailing cry drifted from the forest edge. Then a tall form in a buckskin shirt stepped out into the open waving a coonskin cap.

Tom's finger froze in the act of pressing the trigger. "White men!" he gasped, then broke out in delirious laughter.

"Look! They come from everywhere! The Shawnees have fled!"

It was true. From every side of the clearing small bands of riflemen emerged waving their caps and shouting encouragement to the besieged settlers. Cabin doors burst open and women sank to their knees on the snow-covered ground with their hands clasped in a prayer of thanksgiving. Their men brandished their rifles and leaped and shouted.

Tom staggered out into the cold dawn. Daniel Boone came striding to him, smiling broadly.

"Got your message, Underwood," he said tersely. He held a blood-stained silver medal in his hand. "Found Luke Mathias on the Salt Trail—tomahawked. Shawnee tracks led this way. So I brought the boys along to see what was wrong."

Tom licked his dry, fevered lips and swayed uncertainly. He pointed to the black ashes of the blockhouse and stockade.

"Amos Bowman passed this way and warned us. Major Barkings laughed."

"Natural," replied Boone. "Amos Bowman is such an all-fired liar I didn't believe him myself when he told me that yarn when I met him on the Salt Trail." He shook his head solemnly. "If Luke hadn't crawled fifty yards with that tomahawk buried in his back, we'd o' passed right on by with our packs of rifle powder we're carrying to Vincennes." He nodded northward. "We'll have to be going. We'll run them Shawnees—the dozen-odd left—ahead of us." He patted the long rifle which he had secured from Tom and smiled. "Old M'riar's had her fun today. Shoots plum center like she always did."

As Boone's riflemen with their powder packs on their shoulders swung off in single file toward the north, Tom drew the blanket closer over his bare shoulders and trudged toward his own cabin.

How long he had been standing there, staring at the blackened square in the snow, with his anvil almost buried in the charred remains of a solid beech block, he did not know. A soft hand touched his shoulder.

"When we saw those flames, Luke tried to tell me you had already gone," she said quietly. "I prayed for strength to believe it!"

"Luke's dead," was all he could think to say. His wounds throbbed with fever and the world began spinning crazily before his eyes. He put out a hand to steady himself and it closed over Dorcas' firm, rounded shoulder.

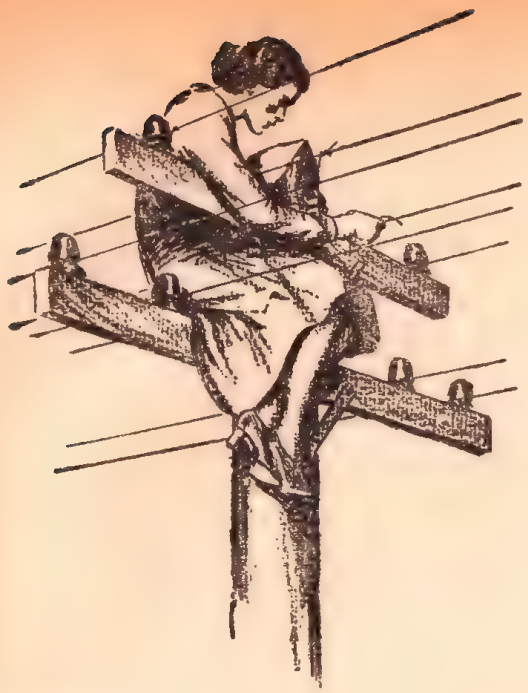
"But I'm glad it wasn't you!" he heard her laughing and sobbing in the same breath. It felt good to lean on some one, to trust implicitly in another's guidance as he dragged his feet wearily. There was no past. No future. Only a pleasant sense of being in the care of strong yet tender hands. He was resting on a bed now with the light warmth of a comfort tucked around his shoulders. Vague sounds of deep voices came to him.

"Ay, Stone Eater! Yonder lies a brave man. And soon to get his reward, I'll warrant!" The voice of Donald Ames rang with pride and happiness. "So long as waters flow and the sun shines, the people of Stone Eater will not forget Strong Hand returned Wo-han to his father's lodge," the chief of the Sacs intoned sonorously. "He has a noble heart and a strong hand. The white tribes will be fools if they do not make him their great chief."

But the words meant nothing to Tom Underwood. Floating on the pool of semi-consciousness, his only bond with a world of grim realities was a small warm hand holding his. "You'll not leave me now!" whispered a vibrant command to him.

He promised with a slow smile, pleasantly aware that Dorcas was leaning over him and holding his face in her hands.

"Oh, Tom—"



Cassidy's Kid

By

CHARLES W. TYLER

Author of "Railroad Romeo," "The Last Witness," etc.

THEY called her Cassidy's kid. She was nineteen, and a lot prettier than a girl in a place like Benton had any right to be. t Benton was just about in the middle of nowhere, a typical desert railroad town.

Old Mike was a section boss. His wife was a gaunt, slatternly woman. Hard work and hard knocks had left the marks of wear and tear on both of them. Nora was eight when her mother died. She was a leggy youngster in pigtails then, with about as much shape and make as a flat car.

She had a shrill, discordant voice and a brat streak. That was when they began calling her Cassidy's kid.

She was always underfoot, or else she was lost. She climbed freight cars and twisted brakewheels, and tried to pump the hand-car, and put things on the track, and plugged the agent's bug, or sending machine, in on the train wire to the everlasting wrath and despair of the despatcher.

A picture of Benton Depot would not have been complete without Cassidy's kid in the foreground, sticking her tongue out at train crews and screeching, "Nah-h-h!"

And then, almost without any warning whatever Cassidy's kid went through a startling metamorphosis. She wasn't a gangling hoyden any more, but a full-blown rose, with curves and shapely legs and nice skin and brown eyes and wavy hair, and all of her arch enemies were suddenly admirers.

The trainmen who had once bawled,

The Gang Thought They'd Covered Everything, but They Didn't Count on Cassidy's Kid

"Hey, leave that switch alone, you ape!" They now raised their hats and murmured: "Howdy, Miss Nora," and hoped that she didn't smile at anybody else as sweetly as she smiled at them.

Tobe Jennings was a Western Union lineman. He was twenty-seven, and about as handsome as a pile of lava rock. But he was clean-cut and wholesome, however, and gave the impression somehow that looks didn't amount to so much after all. He was soft-spoken, straight-forward, and his one physical disability had to do with a poorly behaving heart, for which Cassidy's kid was largely responsible.

Nora had at one time exhibited an inclination to climb telegraph poles, and Tobe had, on several occasions, pulled her protestingly from a cross-arm. There had been something likable in the kid even then, Tobe thought, something a little pathetic; for Mike Cassidy, while a good enough father, failed utterly when it came to the softer touches that lift a youngster over the rough spots.

Nora and Tobe fell in love with each other before they really knew what was happening to them. He awkwardly took her in his arms one night and kissed her, and Nora slapped him. She really hadn't meant to, but, out of the pounding surge of things in her bosom, the hand proved quicker than the heart. She retracted later.

Nora was the night operator at Benton then. She worked from six until twelve, and, sometimes, later. In particular when the fruit rush was on, or passenger traffic was heavy. The little glimpses that Cassidy's kid had of the people on the trains were like brief sketches of fascinating worlds beyond the desert horizon.

IT WAS a gilt-edged book of adventure, and these were pictures—the man in the drawing room who looked like a nobleman; the couple on the observation platform; the people in the club car; the bored faces in the sleeper; the pretty girl and her good-looking companion in the diner. She wondered where they were going.

Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief; matron, heiress, school girl, movie star—all riding the rails to adventure. When the train was gone, Cassidy's kid, alone in the cluttered little telegraph office, would find strange thoughts assailing her. Benton and the desert world that crowded down on it seemed like a dead, empty universe.

Sometimes Nora wondered if even the love of Tobe Jennings could make up for her yearnings to see the magic places where the people on the trains were going. She wanted to sip a little of the heady wine called life.

And then one night a man got off a waiting train and came into the telegraph office. Nora's heart quickened a little. She thought she had never seen a man so handsome. He was tall and dark, and he was very suave and polite. His features were thin, aristocratic, and he had a little mustache.

What Nora did not see was the waxy hardness under the surface, or the austere glint in his small, restless eyes.

He appraised her boldly, and his eyes took fire at what he saw. He said:

"Hullo, beautiful! You take Western Union telegrams?" And his lip lifted in a condescending smile.

"Yes, sir." She pushed a pad of blanks toward him, but he did not see them. He was still taking off the wrappings of a very promising package.

"What is a raving beauty like you doing in a God-forsaken dump like this?" he said. "You ought to be in Hollywood."

Nora blushed. "I was born here," she said diffidently. "I have hardly been anywhere, except Las Vegas and Needles."

They talked until the bell clanged. The stranger held out his hand. "My train is going. I'll see you later; I'm coming

beck. The name is Marvin Salter. Don't forget it."

He did not immediately release her fingers. "And your name?"

"Nora Cassidy." She added. "You forgot your telegram."

"To—never mind the telegram," he said. "You make a man forget trivial matters."

It was story-book stuff, Nora told herself.

She'd never see this Marvin Salter again. But she could not seem to get him out of her mind. Later, almost unconsciously, she found herself comparing him with the tanned, rowdy Tobe Jennings, and not exactly to the advantage of Tobe.

Marvin Salter returned two weeks later. He drove a coupe of an expensive make. There was another man with him. Obviously, they were not just passing through, for Benton was thirty miles from the state highway, and the desert road that threaded the rugged country south dead-ended in Benton. There wasn't any more road, except thin wheel tracks that skirmished among the hills in search of old mines.

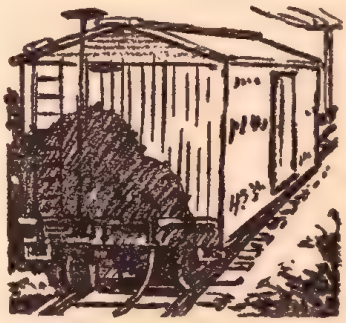
Salter and his companion hired rooms at the Benton Hotel. They registered from Los Angeles, and explained that they were vacationing. They had been to Calico and Randsburg and Ballarat, and across Death Valley to Bull Frog and Rhyolite. They were interested in things off the beaten trails, in ghost towns. They had heard of the legendary lost Dutch Over Mine, supposedly in the vicinity of Benton. Perhaps they could get some old prospector to guide them through the back country.

In the meantime, it was nice to just lie around in the desert sunshine.

IT WAS not hard to see where Salter's interest lay. He spent most of his time in Nora's company. He visited her at the telegraph office, and took her driving in his big car. They rode horseback together.

Benton lifted its scandalized eyebrows and nodded sagely. It was an outrageous flirtation, and as of one voice the townsfolk were agreed that Cassidy's kid was raising hell again.

Salter exhibited a great deal of interest in the railroad and the trains and signals. He asked innumerable questions. Sometimes Nora wondered at it a little. He wanted to know so much, but volunteered nothing concerning himself.



When Tobe heard about the stranger's attentiveness, he wasted no time in diplomatic approach, for he had known Nora too long to be wasteful of words.

"Who is this cockeyed dude that's hanging around here?" he wanted to know. "I'm liable to take a poke at him."

And Nora had flared with characteristic explosiveness. "You mind your own business, Tobe Jennings! Mr. Salter is a fine gentleman."

"I am minding my own business," Tobe stormed. "You're my business. And I don't like the looks of this pearl-pink guy, with his eyebrow on his lip."

"I like it," Nora declared with heat. "It makes him distinguished looking."

"So that's the how of it!" cracked Tobe. "Well, if this bird don't keep away from you with his dewlap, I'll move it for him."

There was further wordy violence, and in the end the severing of diplomatic relations. Figuratively speaking, Cassidy's kid was climbing telegraph poles again, and defying Tobe to take her down.

And Tobe, Western Union trouble shooter, suddenly discovered that here was something that a lineman couldn't patch.

He went his way, with his speeder and his climbers and his tool-laden belt, and he was utterly miserable.

Nora grew a bit reckless, as she encouraged Marvin Salter. She wanted to hurt Tobe—a little; not much.

Salter wanted her to marry him. He promised her the kingdoms of the world. There would be travel and pretty clothes and maid servants.

Nora basked in the sunshine of Marvin Salter's fervor until it got a trifle too warm, and then she backed up a little into the shade and began to examine the fruit in the bottom of the basket with tomboyish candor.

It was such a little thing that caused Nora to slant her first questioning side glance at Salter. He had called for her in his car. She said, "Where were you last night?"

And the porcelain hardness of Salter came nearer to cracking than it ever had before. A strange pink flush crept into his cheeks, while his eyes chilled. He hesitated just an instant.

"Oh, Blake and I drove to San Sebastian," with a careless shrug. "Got back a little after twelve."

The long-fringed awnings drew down a little over Nora's eyes, and the corner of her mouth twitched ever so slightly. San Sebastian was out on the state highway. The road was sand, or sand and gravel, every foot of the way from Benton.

And yet—caked in the little eyelets of the steel wheels of Salter's car was salmon-red mud. Mud that had not been there yesterday.

The pattern of every desert road was like a steel-cut engraving in the mind of the girl. Red mud. That would be Deadman Dry Lake, this side of South Pass. It had rained around three o'clock. She had heard her father get up to look out.

The railroad skirted Deadman Dry Lake. It was ten miles off the automobile road to San Sebastian. A rutted, crooked road lead to it. What had Salter been doing at Deadman Dry Lake after three o'clock in the morning? And why would he wish to keep the matter a secret?

Nora looked at him, and there was in her eyes the old reckless impudence of Cassidy's kid.

"You're not a very convincing liar," she said, with a toss of her head.

For just an instant Salter's eyes windowed a deadly glint; then they grew smoky, and he forced a laugh. "I don't get you baby." His voice was flecked with hardness.

"You want to take the high road around a dry lake when it rains," Nora said. "And I *don't* like to be called ba-a-by."

WHEN Salter got back to the hotel, he said to "Kip" Blake: "That jane was shooting off her face." And he repeated what Nora had said.

"Dames are poison," Blake said sourly. He was a short, heavy-set man, with a glass-eyed stare and a chalky complexion.

"I know," Salter said, "but in this case, the broad is fronting for us, and doing a sweet job. The little fool is nuts about me. She is why I'm here—that's what the town is saying."

Blake grunted.

"She ditched the clod she was going with for me," Salter went on, "and the hicks are all a-sweat over the romance of the rich bachelor meeting his soul-mate in a desert telegraph office."

"Better watch the skirt," Blake said, with a shrug. "That's all."

Nora possessed a woman's insatiable curiosity. She couldn't erase from her mind the thought of the red mud on the wheels and under the mudguards of Salter's car.

That road to the dry lake dead-ended at the old South Pass depot, but the station was closed now and the building was boarded up. There were two sets of ruts—the wet weather road that skirted the hills and the road that crossed the end of Deadman Dry Lake.

When Salter drove out—probably between midnight and three o'clock—the dry lake had been hard as pavement, but when he came back it was slick ooze.

It was characteristic of Nora that she respond to the first impulse that came into her head. She was, after all, still Cassidy's kid, in more respects than one.

"I'd just like to see where Marvin went, out there to South Pass," she told herself. "The tire marks will be plain as day."

IT WAS shortly after noon that she cranked up old Mike's Model-T and climbed in. Tobe Jennings was lifting his speeder from the track when she drove past the depot. He made believe that he didn't see her.

Nora had missed him these past two weeks, and more than she liked to admit. She stopped the car, and waited for him to speak, but when he turned his back and started toward the telegraph office, she squawked the horn.

"Come here, you dunce!"

Tobe's heart jumped into his throat and a blush darkened his tan. He was grinning a little sheepishly when he turned toward the car.

"Hullo—Nora," he said.

"You weren't going to speak to me, were you?"

"Nope."

"Honest, you make me so *darned* mad—"

"Well, I thought you was sore at me."

"Oh, climb off your high horse." Her lip quivered, just the least mite.

"How's the wart?"

"Shut up!"

"Yes'm."

"Going to be in Benton tonight?"

"If I ain't shootin' trouble. Got to pull slack out west tomorrow."

"Come over to the telegraph office tonight and have a cup of coffee. I've got lots to tell you."

"Hey! That's a bet." Tobe added, "Where you going now?"

"Just out for a rattling good ride." Nora smiled—that old impish grin—and the transmission chattered and the flivver lurched away.

There were clean-cut tire marks in the ruts that lifted on the slope to South Pass.

The old yellow depot seemed very bleak and forlorn. It had been closed for economy's sake two years before. It made Nora think of a sightless beggar beside the road. The mast was there, but the semaphore arms had been removed. There were some freight cars in a spur—stored against the day when the railroad would need them.

Nora drove past the empty depot. She saw where Salter's car had been driven close beside the station. There was the place where it had been turned around.

A vague, disturbing something suddenly laid hold of her. Her lids narrowed and her eyes made a quick exploration. She saw a thin wisp of blue smoke lifting from the ground beside the weathered planks of the platform. It was a cigarette, discarded a few minutes before.

"Some bo," was her first thought. And then the mental prompting, "Marvin Salter came here to meet somebody last night! *And they are still here!*"

The engine of the flivver was idling noisily and steam spurted from the radiator. The girl's lips tightened a little, and suddenly something was exploding in her brain. It was, perhaps, woman's intuition, a sixth sense, that spilled its flood of apprehension.

Nora grew tense. Her heart seemed to be making almost as much noise as that

loose connecting-rod. Did she imagine it, or was that side door open just a little. Her coming here had been prompted by that same cross-grained streak of perversity that had always flourished inside of her. But now she wanted nothing so much as to get away.

She wasn't timid, but here was a danger that was very real. She mustn't make any move that would betray the fact that she suspected that the old depot held a secret.

She tried to whistle. She could pucker her lips all right, but no sound came out. It didn't matter—the darned engine was banging so that no one could hear her anyway. Nora jerked at the throttle and pushed hard on the low pedal.

Suddenly somebody was yelling above the noise of the wildly racing engine. She caught a movement from the corner of her eye.

She yanked at the steering wheel with all of her strength—yanked too hard, for the wheels locked and the little car lunged in a wild arc, to hit the platform with a resounding crash.

She gritted, "Damn it!" and reached down for the rusty monkey wrench that was always kicking around on the floor boards. Before she could wield it, two men were dragging her over the side of the car.

She continued to fight with the tempestuous fury of a young wildcat, but it was useless. They forced her into the depot and tied her with rope. Her eyes were like fanned coals; her bosom rose and fell as she gasped for breath. She hadn't meant to blubber, but two tears rolled down her cheeks.

The place was dark and foul with stale tobacco smoke. There were four men. One of them turned the beam of a flashlight on her, and cursed in a flat tone.

"Leave it to a damn dame to come pryin' around."

Another said, "We gotta get rid of her."

The first speaker said, "What were ya doin' up here?"

"What are *you* doing here?" Nora countered.

"Plenty, lady." The speaker laughed shortly. "You're liable to see a show."

THEY discussed the matter of getting rid of her with brutal frankness. They had not reached a decision when they went out to move her car. She heard it crash over a bank into the brush a short distance from the station, and her heart sank.

What a fool she'd been! What a stupid, egotistical little wretch! She had played right into the hands of Marvin Salter. The man was a crook. This was a bandit nest. The reason for his interest in the movement of trains and in the operation of the signal system was all too apparent.

It was not hard to guess what loot Salter's keen criminal mind was intent on. Once a month a Federal Reserve bank on the Coast shipped to a bank at Big Rock —the town that had mushroomed on the desert near the site of the Big Rock Dam —rich-laden pouches containing money for payrolls. As much as one hundred thousand dollars and more.

Salter must be in touch with those who could give him vital information concerning the day and hour that the money pouches would move. He had received a number of coded telegrams at Benton. The last one had come only the evening before.

There was a cellar under one end of the old depot, a close-walled dungeon with shelves and a rack that had once held storage batteries. Nora's captors taped her mouth and carried her down the stairs.

A small oblong window was set in one foundation wall. It was grimed and laced with cobwebs. Through it, the girl watched at last the graying approach of night. From time to time there was the

roar and rumble of passing trains. No. 1 went racing west. No. 8 stormed up the grade and whispered away to the east.

There were freights, and a light engine and caboose.

Nora silently fought her bonds—straining, tugging, and resting. Each effort left her convinced that there was no possible hope of loosening the tight hempen strands.

Night closed the window, except for a star that peeped in. The door at the head

of the stairs had a broken panel. Voices reached her. Occasionally she caught phrases, broken sentences — enough so that she could piece out the dread terror that was ahead.

They were going to open a switch, which would automatically set a block signal at red. No. 4 was the train. The Ranger. They would dynamite the mail car. The money pouches were to be loaded onto the engine, which was to be run back on the westbound track to some point of contact, previously arranged, with other members of the gang.

There was more talk of the get-away, but Nora couldn't pick it up. She heard, at last, other sounds—ominous, metallic, like the working of the ejector mechanism of a rifle or pump gun. She heard enough to know that the men were assembling machine-guns. It was hideous. What chance would the mail clerks have?

Nora's wrists and ankles were raw, swollen. Her legs and arms were numb. The tape across her mouth gagged her, but she did not surrender in her frantic efforts to get free.

THE hours dragged. There was no time any more, only an endless nightmare. And then, when it had seemed that she could endure her cramped torture no longer, when she almost wanted to die, she felt that first slight slack in the cords. She renewed her efforts, and at last her hands were free—free, but well-nigh useless.

She rubbed her arms to restore the circulation, and began to pick at the knots of the loops about her ankles.

One of the men came down the stairs, and she thrust her hands behind her back and rolled onto them. His flashlight rested its white circle on her. He did not come all of the way down.

A voice above said, "The dame all right?"

"Yeah."

"Better cool her."

"Time enough for that. We might toss one of them cough sticks at the dump after we gut the mail car."

Nora watched the speaker's feet going up the stairs, and she breathed a little prayer.

She worked her feet free and rubbed them hurriedly. She didn't want them to fold up under her. On the floor under the rack that had held the storage batteries, she found a piece of copper wire. She made it into a little coil and put it inside of her blouse.

Softly she made her way to the window, and her fingers explored its fastenings. The sash had been nailed shut. She'd have to break the glass. If only a train would go by, but none did. She didn't dare think how near it must be to the time that No. 4 was due.

She found a short piece of board, and waited. She was taking a desperate gamble. If they caught her, she'd probably not be of much help to anybody. Two members of the gang were somewhere outside; she could hear their voices.

Now she saw the light of a ciga-

rette out toward the switch. There were still voices above.

And now footsteps were moving toward the cellar door again. Nora drew one long, quavering breath. "It's time to go!" she murmured. And smashed the glass—both panes, and knocked out the slender sash division.

Instantly there was a yell from above and a door banged open. Nora threw herself at the opening, and dragged herself through, as a flashlight poured its flood into the cellar.

Outside, she dropped for a moment by the edge of the platform. The two men who had gone toward the west switch were running for the depot. Nora hugged the rear wall of the station where the shadows were the deepest; then suddenly darted across the main line tracks and fairly hurled herself beneath a freight car.

Cinders gouged her hands and knees, as she scrambled through. Behind her were shouts and little darting white eyes, searching the night. In spite of her shakiness, Nora ran with surprising speed, ran with the full, loose-jointed stride that had been the vaunted gait of Cassidy's kid when danger threatened.

The long line of freight cars still offered shelter.

She lurched to a standstill at last beside a telegraph pole.

In years gone by, it had been her tomboy boast that she could shin a telegraph pole faster than any boy in Benton. And she had not forgotten how, though there was a little more weight now and yesterday's pipe-stem legs were slightly more adaptable to the need.

Nora caught at last at the brackets and dragged herself up between the wires to the lower cross-arm. Here she rested, gasping breath into her aching lungs. She smiled a little. She felt that she was almost among friends.

Wires. Wires spanning the desert, singing the ceaseless song of the telegraph. Western Union trunk lines. Wires of the press; train wires; way wires. Copper; iron. Nora knew every one of them; knew their numbers, and their positions on the cross-arms. She had often studied them out with Tobe on the little sketches that he had.

No. 24, inside on the upper arm—that was an Associated Press wire, demanding uninterrupted service always. That was the train wire below. No. 17. Important to the life of the division.

She took the little wad of flexible wire from her bosom and bent one end of it to the A.P. wire; then led the loose strand down and twisted it around the train wire.

She had now completed a cross, putting both circuits out.

On the track below her were two hurrying figures, the fingers of their flashlights reaching out here and there like dreadful skeleton feelers.

Nora held tight to the pole. They did not look up.

WHEN Nora did not put in an appearance at the telegraph office at six o'clock old Aaron Slate began to swear. He wanted relief. He saw Mike Cassidy coming down the street and he yelled at him.

"Where the hell is Nora?"

"If I could tell yez," old Mike snorted, "I'd be a domsite smarter man than both of us. All I know, the flivver is gone, an' there ain't no fire in the stove an' no spuds peeled."

The agent slammed back into the telegraph office to answer a clattering sounder.

Tobe Jennings went to the station about eight o'clock. He was whistling all of the way down the street. He hadn't been so happy in a coon's age. When he saw the sour face of Aaron Slate through the window, the whistle petered out.

"What's the matter with Nora?" he demanded, pushing open the door.

"I don't know," growled the agent. "She ain't been here, an' she ain't been home. I tell you, if that girl was mine—"

Tobe said, "The last I saw of her, she was going across the tracks in old Mike's Ford." He smoked a cigarette; then went out to the platform wearing a troubled frown.

The hours passed. Some one in the group in front of the general store said, "Well, I hear Cassidy's kid is lost again."

"Maybe she run off with that rich feller that's been shinin' up to her," another suggested.

"Nope," a newcomer to the group said. "Salter's over to the hotel playin' poker."

No. 4, the Ranger, was due at Benton at fifteen minutes past midnight. It was a little before twelve when the train wire failed. A test showed that the trouble was between Benton and Selma, the next open station east.

Tobe Jennings was in the telegraph office listening to the sounder on the Western Union wire. Aaron Slate was changing spring jacks and plugs at the switchboard. The wire chief was snapping out terse telegraphic instructions. Tobe reported in.

The sounder on the commercial circuit hammered out a message for Tobe, which translated from the Morse idiom, said: "Cross on No. 24. Wheatstone Bridge test shows the trouble about eight miles east of Benton. Shoot it in a hurry. Looks about South Pass."

A new train wire had been set up, but the one in trouble was still cut through a set of instruments in the Benton office. The cross seemed to be clearing now, for there was a peculiar fluttering of the sounder in a series of clicks that seemed to have a persistent repetition.

Tobe stared at the instrument, opened and closed the key, and listened again. "It's awful heavy," he told the agent, "but it sounds as though somebody was trying to make a dash and a dot. Great Scott! N! And N could be Nora!"

Aaron Slate blinked. "Well, durn my hide—"

"I'm going to get old Mike Cassidy to take me to South Pass," Tobe cried. "There's something funny out there. Something has happened to Nora."

"Well, keep that blasted section car off the east-bound until No. 4 goes," said the agent. "There's Dale Station reportin' 'em now."

TOBE had started for the door, and for the first time was aware that Marvin Salter was framed in the doorway, his eyes like dots of moulten steel. The man known as Blake was standing behind him, his face a cold mask.

Tobe shouldered past Salter, his burly shoulders roughing the other. Salter's big car was standing behind the depot. The thought that flashed into Tobe's mind was, "He came to pick up Nora."

Suddenly something seemed to ruffle the flesh at the back of Tobe's neck. He hadn't taken half a dozen steps when he became aware of the fact that two figures were moving up, one on either side of him.

And then something hard was thrust into the small of his back, and Salter's clipped voice rasped, "Open your trap and I'll blast you!"

Tobe stopped and jerked around. "What the hell is this? Get away from me! I got work to do."

"Take it easy, feller," warned Kip Blake in a low voice that carried menace.

"Listen, you guys!" Tobe Jennings' fists clenched. "I got to go to South Pass, an' I ain't got no time to argue, or I'd sock you so hard—"

"You're going to hell, maybe," Blake said, "but you are not going to South Pass."

"Get in that car!" Marvin Salter's voice had a little hiss, like an enraged viper. "This is a gat you got in your kidneys, and we mean business."

Tobe Jennings made a little whistling

sound through his teeth. His brain flamed with wild thoughts. These birds were crooks. That cross was no ordinary brand of wire trouble. Somebody out there was trying to center attention on South Pass, and that somebody was Nora. God only knew what she had stumbled into, but whatever it was, it had something to do with these fellows.

"In the car, you!" Blake's fingers were like a vise on Tobe's right arm. "In the car, or we'll let you have it right here."

Far away on the velvet rim of the desert, a diamond point of light announced that No. 4 was coming out of Black Rascal Canyon.

The train order signal above the depot showed red, but Aaron Slate would throw it to green before No. 4 came screaming down on Benton.

Tobe wasn't thinking about No. 4; he was thinking about Nora, and that these men didn't intend that he should go to South Pass. The pressure of the gun in his back was savage, but he didn't feel the hurt of it.

The town lay silent under the blanket of night. Except in the telegraph office, only two or three lights were visible. The streets were deserted.

Tobe said, "All right, easy on that gun." He started toward the car. It was long and racy-looking. The half light of the desert night gave it a dull glint.

Tobe exploded into action with the swinging of the door. He wrenched around in a flash, jamming Blake against Salter. Salter fired, but Tobe had twisted partly clear of the gun-muzzle. The bullet creased the lineman along the ribs and spun itself into a tight-wrapped cocoon as it bored on through his jacket.

Salter snarled an oath and tried to jam the automatic against Tobe's body, but he had suddenly become involved in a blast of human dynamite that smashed him toward the car entrance and catapulted the heavy steel door against him with stunning force.

Salter, having the door to contend with, was delayed in pumping another bullet at young Mr. Jennings. Blake was partially successful in applying a strangle hold. He did get his gorilla-like arms around Tobe's neck, but Tobe squatted and snapped Blake over his shoulders and against the car door, which Salter was thrusting away from him.

There was another orange lance and a report, but the snub-nosed bit of lead again failed in its search, as Tobe struck the weapon aside with his left and at the same time measured Salter with a whistling right.

No. 4 was on the flats to the west, moving toward Benton like an iron avalanche. The signal eye above the depot still stood at red. The whistle screamed, a long-drawn, imperative demand for a clear rail.

At the sound of the shot, Aaron Slate went to the door and squinted out. The blue night revealed madly pawing shapes, not thirty feet away. There was a thudding impact and a grunt. And, again, the detonation of a big-caliber pistol.

The agent's jaw sagged. The pale light revealed a face washed by utter bewilderment.

"Good Godfrey!" His voice rose in shrill dismay. "What in Tophet has got into this town?" The stormy approach of No. 4, wheels fire-rimmed by the impact of brakes, shook him from his stupor. He had forgotten to clear the signal, but it was too late now.

UP THE street a door was flung open and light streamed out. A window banged. Somebody ran out of the hotel.

Mike Cassidy and Chet Lang, a deputy sheriff, had returned from San Sebastian an hour before. They had been looking for Nora, and were discussing the situation over coffee and sandwiches in the hotel annex, being agreed that the girl had been set afoot by the decrepit flivver on some remote desert road.

They were among the first to reach the depot.

Marvin Salter was on the ground. Tobe, hatless and rumpled, had possessed himself of the other's gun. Blake, finding his house of cards tumbling about his ears, had jumped into the car. The big coupe lurched away toward the crossing, but the surging bulk of the big passenger engine on No. 4 cut him off, as the locomotive came at last to a grinding stop east of the depot.

Lanterns danced beside the bulking black shapes of the cars, converging on the telegraph office. A square-jawed guard, wearing a belt and six-shooter, came from the mail car. When he heard what had happened, he said, "It's probably lucky we didn't go on to South Pass. We're carrying one hundred and twenty thousand dollars in cold cash."

"There ought to be a law ag'in' it," croaked the agent, flapping his hand. "Lookit the mess we're in."

Salter and Blake were locked up, refusing to answer any and all questions. Snarlingly they cursed—not the folly of their planned looting of the United States mail, but an impertinent young woman, at whose door they laid their travail.

The engine on No. 4 was uncoupled from the train, and a posse, consisting of a dozen grim men armed with Winchesters, crowded into the cab.

Already disconcerted by the escape of the girl, the members of the train robber gang at South Pass realized that the game was up when, instead of the long train of No. 4, a light engine came cautiously up the east-bound track and then stopped half a mile from the old depot.

To barricade themselves in the empty station would have been worse than folly. The desert offered such scant hope of escape as was afforded them, and they retreated into it, which only delayed their capture a matter of hours.

TOBE JENNINGS found Nora. She was bruised and sore, but all bodily discomfiture was forgotten when she heard Tobe's voice.

"Listen, you!" he shouted at her. "I planked that dude with the nose-warmer, and I planked him good. He wa'n't nothing but a cheap crook anyhow."

And Nora cried, "Oh, Tobe, I'm so glad to see you, you old darling!"

"I'm just about sick of dragging you off cross-arms," Tobe said.

"This is the last time," Nora said, when at last her feet were on the ground, and Tobe's comforting arms were around her. "I promise."

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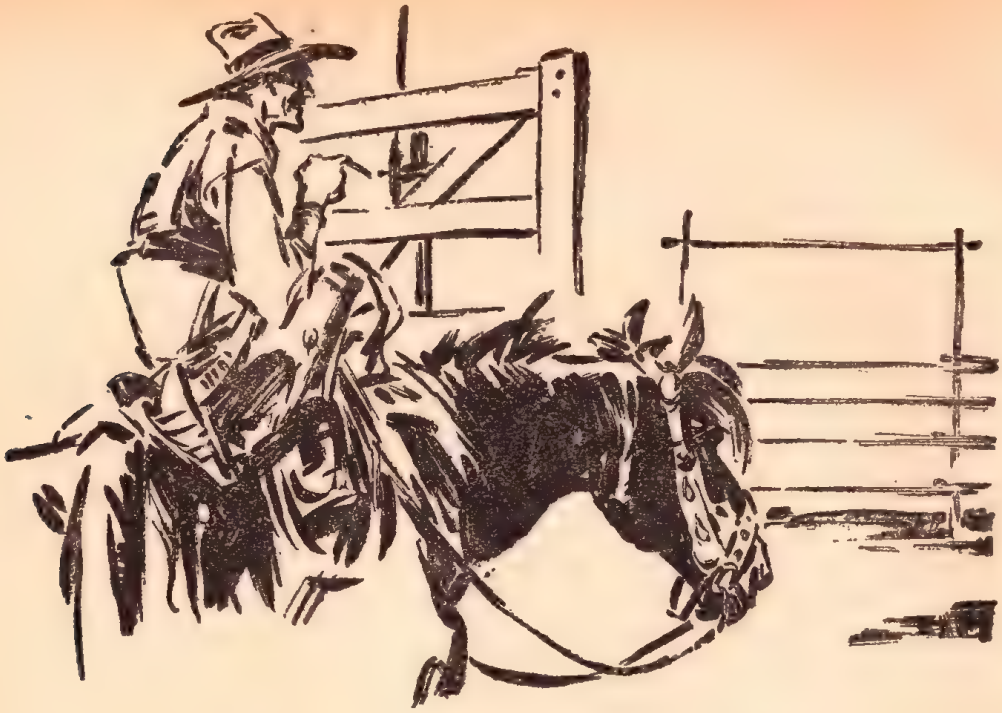


Buzzard's Watch

By W. H. B. KENT

Author of "The Tenderfoot," etc.

JOHN STARK of the Territorial Rangers sat on the counter in the Sacatone Trading Company, in Sacatone City, southern Arizona. He rolled the rowels of his straight shanked spurs up and down the boards and sniffed the smell of coffee, brown sugar, leather and tin things. He reached long slim fingers down into the sugar barrel and brought up a chunk of brown sugar to roll over his tongue. He felt quite at peace with the world. He turned a lean brown sombre eyed face to look at the fat clerk. His wide thin lipped mouth seemed about to grin.

The clerk, a fat, bald, middle aged man of intense seriousness asked, "You know the Double Circle outfit, don't you?"

Stark nodded, "Double Circle. Oh, yes. Up in the foothills. Horses."

The fat clerk said, "Well, they sold out. Sold out to a young fellow named Arnold. Come from back East somewheres, New Yawk mebbe."

Stark brought up another chunk of brown sugar and nodded his head, "Yeah," he said, "they will do it."

The clerk looked blank for a minute, asking, "Do what?" Not waiting for an answer he went on, "Nice lad, Arnold is. I could see he knows horses." The fat man walked around from behind the counter and threw out his hands to say, "But he don't know men—leastways, not the kind of men we got here in southern Arizona Territory."

Stark asked idly, "What kind we got here, Fat, besides you and me."

Fat said, "Well, we got Joe Palmer, ain't we?" He seemed to put that as something of a poser, as though there was no answer.

Stark's sombre eyes gleamed, lightning swift for an instant. Then he asked, "What's Joe Palmer up to these days?"

Fat pointed a finger at the Territorial Ranger and shook it angrily, "He's stealing that Arnold lad blind—that's what Joe Palmer's doing."

Stark shrugged powerful shoulders and seemed to lose interest. "Well," he offered, "your friend Arnold's got a gun, ain't he? Or he can hire him a gunman now, can't he?"

Fat made a disgusting noise of complete disbelief. "He probably don't know nothing about it and if he did he expects to call up the police or some such fool thing."

Stark's hard face did crease into a thin lipped grin. He said, "And I suppose there's a girl somewhere in your woodpile?"

THE fat clerk stopped walking around and stared suspiciously at the Ranger. He asked vacantly, "Woodpile? Who said anything about a woodpile?" Then he moved quickly over and slammed the cover onto the sugar barrel. He said fretfully, "I wish sometimes, John Stark, you could learn to talk sense."

Stark said, blandly, "I sometimes wish so too, Fat." He gave an exaggerated sigh, complaining, "Fat, I was aiming to sit here and eat sugar until the shank of the afternoon, then me and the bay would plod along down to Tucson in the cool of the night. And tomorrow I would feed myself up and rest my spurs on a real nice office desk. Now you go yammering about woodpiles and that cooks it."

The fat clerk blinked, "Woodpiles?"

With lithe grace Stark slid off the counter and stretched long arms above his head in a yawn. "All right, Fat," he said. "But how about one little lump of sugar for the bay?"

The fat clerk beamed, "I knew you'd look into it, John, if I put it up to you jest right. But wait." He ambled around back of the counter, opened a dirty glass display case and brought out two sticks of red and white striped candy. "Give him these," he said happily.

Stark grinned at the fat, serious clerk, reached out and chucked him under his second chin, "You can sleep nights now, Fat, your woodpile is safe."

Fat threw down his hands in disgust, following Stark to the door, complaining, "There are times, John Stark, when I think you're just a plumb fool."

Stark's lean long finger tapped Fat's chest. He said, with enormous seriousness, "But don't tell nobody, Fat. Let 'em find it out theirselves."

Stark pushed open the screen door and his slitted eyes fought the glare of the desert sun. With the slam of the screen door behind him it seemed to be a different man who now faced the heat and white glare. His facetiousness seemed to have been left behind the door and this was a lean, dark, hard faced man—a man whose business it was to bring peace to the desert—bring it with a gun, the peace of death.

A great bay horse at the hitch rail raised a splendid head to look at Stark. The horse nickered. Stark took the reins that had been merely hung over the hitch rail and held a stick of candy out to the horse. The horse bared white teeth to take the candy, gently, and began clumping on it, an approving look in his wide apart, intelligent eyes. With smooth grace Stark slid up into the saddle and went padding away down the one dusty street of Sacatone City. He was thinking of the young fellow who would buy a horse outfit, who knew horses, but didn't know men—and especially men like Joe Palmer. Suddenly he grinned whimsically, thinking, "And Fat didn't have a girl up his sleeve this time." Later he thought, "And that's good, damn 'em." Then he told the horse, out loud, "We been hoping for three years we could ketch up with this Joe Palmer person." The horse flicked his little pointed ears and stepped out briskly.

Stark picked up the reins said, "Let's go," and the horse fell into an easy, mile-devouring lope.

IN THE early afternoon Stark was looking out from a clump of live oak brush. He was looking down a little slope in the foothills of the Chollos, looking down to a little flat where running water drew a band of bright green through a drab country, and where three men were working over a horse.

He had ridden over the ridge, through the scattered live oak trees and caught the movement of the men, in watching, sombre eyes. He rode back a little, dismounted, dropped the reins and crept forward to a clump of brush to see what was going on. In the glare of the sunlight he saw three men at work, intent on their job. A horse was lying on its side, loops of rope around its feet.

A man was sitting on the horse's head, speaking in curt sentences to the other two. Stark thought, "Joe Palmer."

A few yards away a man was taking a branding iron from a little fire. The fire had burned down to a bed of coals and no smoke drifted up into the still air. The third man came from the stream wringing out the water from a small piece of blanket. Stark thought, "Branding through a wet blanket," and all the true cowman's hatred, and the Ranger's contempt for a thief surged through John Stark.

But it was not the brand blotting that most interested John Stark. Out beyond the fire, a little way down the creek, a man was lying on his back. A little further on a saddled horse, with dropped reins seemed to be patiently waiting for the figure on the ground to come to life and ride away.

The figure on the ground lay with feet together and arms outspread, like a cross, as though he might have been crucified. Everything about the horse and the man on the ground was new. The sun was reflected from the shiny new leather of the saddle, of the chaps, and from the silver mounting, of the bridle. A new hat, stiff and wide brimmed lay a few feet away. And John Stark thought, "And that, I suppose, is the lad Arnold who knows horses—but don't know men."

Sudden rage came to Stark and ebbed away to a cold desire to kill. He thought of the rifle in the scabbard back on the bay horse, thinking. "I could get all three from here." Then he sighed, thinking, "That's no way for a Ranger. I have to know all about it before I can move." He turned his sombre eyes to watch the three men.

THEY had finished with the brand blotting. A man gave a quick twitch to the ropes and Joe Palmer got up from the horse's head. The horse surged to his feet, looked white-eyed at the men, snorted angrily, then trotted away across the creek. The men laughed.

They stood for a minute watching the horse, then moved over to their horses and mounted. They stopped a minute, talking, looking at the figure on the ground. Finally one of them rode over, gathered up the reins of the waiting horse and led him back to the group. They rode away then, leading the horse, up the valley, talking and laughing, indifferent to what they had left there stretched out in the sunlight as though nailed to a cross.

Stark listened and watched a long time to make sure they had gone. Convinced at last, he spoke aloud, "And that, Joe Palmer, will put you where you belong—dead and gone to hell." He went back through the trees to the big bay, mounted

and rode slowly down the slope toward the figure on the ground.

A shadow drifted across Stark and he raised his eyes to a hot sky to watch a buzzard circle, effortless, on outstretched wings, then drift silently down the sunshine and drop to hanging feet beside the figure on the ground. The red, naked head of the filthy bird glistened obscenely in the sunlight. The bird waddled over to the figure and stood a minute looking down. Then he gave a raucous, fretful cry, took a few steps and launched itself upward on flapping wings. A little way up the slope it came to earth again, stretched its wings, ruffled coarse feathers, then pulled its red head down in between hunched shoulders as though prepared to wait.

The action of the bird roused Stark's interest. His face lit up and the horse stepped out briskly. Stark thought, "So he's not dead yet." He rode up to the figure and sat looking down at a young fellow with crisp, black hair and a distinctly aquiline nose. His whole outfit, chaps, boots, hat, belt and six-shooter were all new. Stark thought, "Yeah, that'll be Arnold," and he looked at what appeared to be a hole in the side of his head. There was a pool of blood beside the head. Flies were clustering in a disgusting mass over the blood.

Stark thought, "But the buzzard knew he was not dead." He slid off the bay and put his hand inside the shirt. After a minute he told himself, "Hell, he's a long way from dead." He turned the head to one side and then he saw a long crease across the skull over the ear. With long, slim fingers he felt along the crease for a fracture.

The skull was intact. He tied the young fellow's red neck-scarf around the head, binding up the wound.

The click of horse shoes on a rock brought him to his feet like a flash, hard-eyed, and a hand on the butt of his six-shooter.

THREE people were riding around a point of land a little way down the stream. When they saw Stark they pulled up their horses and stared. A minute later one of the three came on, briskly, and the other two followed more slowly. Stark thought, "Oh, hell." The one coming on at a brisk trot was a girl.

Stark's thin lips creased into a wry grin as he took in the girl, the man's cow saddle, high heeled boots, chaps and a man's blue denim blouse over a fine white shirt. He noticed that the blouse could not be buttoned over the swelling breasts. He looked away from that, quickly, looked up to see heavy black hair drawn smartly down into a heavy knot at the back of the small shapely head. And he saw the same high thin nose, the same wide firm mouth but more full lipped as the man on the ground. And for an instant, he forgot where he was when he found himself looking into wide violet eyes. The girl wore long buckskin gauntlets and carried a wide brimmed, high crowned hat in one hand. She smiled at Stark, saying, Hello."

Stark said "Hello" and looked beyond her to the two men who were coming. He had never seen them before, but he knew the type. He thought, "Hmm. Tough ones. Killers. How did these Arnold kids get hold of that kind?"

Then the girl had ridden around Stark's big bay and saw the figure on the ground. She half screamed, "Oh!" Then she gasped, "It's Ted!"

She was on her knees beside the figure, her hands on his shoulders, whispering, "Ted! Ted! Oh, Ted!"

Stark walked around the other side so he could face the two men on horseback. He spoke to the girl. "It's all right," he told her, "He ain't hurt bad. Just out for a little while. He'll come to sometime."

The girl looked up at the lean, hard face of the Ranger. She said, "Oh, do you think so?" Blood came back into her white face and the violet eyes were less strained. After looking at Stark intently

for a minute she seemed to accept his statement, to, unconsciously, rely on his word. She asked quickly, "What happened?"

"Yeah, feller?" one of the men on horseback asked and his voice was a cool sneer. "Yeah, feller," he asked, "what happened?"

Stark didn't like the men, nor their tone. He thought again, "How did these Arnold kids pick up them two?" He looked at the man bleakly, saying quietly, "Looks like he had been shot."

The girl gasped, "Shot! Shot?"

The burly man who had done the talking, the one with a ragged red mustache and stubby beard in patches sneered. "Yeah, he's been shot all right." His air became truculent, "And we're here asking who done it?"

STARK was going to say, "Joe Palmer," and then he looked at the other man. He liked the silent one still less. The silent one was young, with whitish eyes and white eyebrows. Two buck teeth rested on his lower lip. And his whitish eyes held the cold, unblinking stare of a reptile

Stark thought, "I don't like it." Out loud he said, nonchalantly, "Can't say. I rode up and found him like this."

The burly one asked, "How come the blood on yore hands, feller?"

Stark's eyes narrowed, then he held out the bloody fingers, looking bleakly at the talker. He said, "Water will wash the blood off my hands." He emphasized the "my."

The man snarled, "Meaning what?" and Stark snarled back, "Meaning whatever you like—feller."

The man's fingers twitched and hovered toward the belt of his six-shooter. The silent one still sat there, staring unblinking at Stark. Stark thought, "That's the one to watch." Then they heard the girl exclaim, "Oh, why do you stand here talking. Do something. Somebody get a doctor." She turned to Stark. "We must get the doctor from town."

Stark's somber eyes looked into the violet ones, then he asked, "Who are these men? Working for you?"

The girl was impatient. She said, "Oh, yes. Yes, of course. We needed help and Mr. Palmer loaned us Hank and Whitey."

Stark thought, "That cooks it."

He turned away from the violet eyes, quickly, to look at the two men. He was thinking fast. "Joe Palmer plants these two killers on the Arnold kids." Then he thought, "Damn lucky I didn't say Joe Palmer out loud before I knew how the land lay. I'd a been dead by now—and the Arnold lad too." He followed that out, thinking, "They are not going to let the Arnold lad come alive and say that Joe Palmer shot him." Stark fastened that in his mind, "They will not let him live to talk."

And then John Stark of the Territorial Rangers turned, as he could, into the cold blooded killer, and was as ruthless, as remorseless as the white eyed fellow who still stared with his reptilian eyes. Stark turned a cold, bleak face to listen to the girl. She was ordering the burly one, "Hank, you go to town and get the doctor. Kill horses. Get him quick as you can. We will get Ted to the ranch somehow."

But the burly one shook his head. He spoke in a fatherly way, but insistent, "Tain't safe, Ann," he said, "Tain't safe." He threw out a fat, dirty left hand at Stark, going on, "We find Ted here, hurt bad, and this feller standing over him. I wouldn't feel safe, Ann, leaving him here with you and Ted."

And that was one of the few occasions in his life that Stark laughed out loud.

The girl looked at Stark from wide, startled eyes. Then she said, "You go to town. Please. Get the doctor."

Stark gave her a brief look and turned back to watch the two men. "Sorry," he said. "Can't go to town."

The burly one, Hank, gave a sneering

laugh, "Yeah, that's right. That's where the sheriff lives."

STARK paid no attention to that, talking to the girl, but watching Hank and Whitey, "You don't need a doctor," he told the girl. "We'll get him to the ranch and he'll be all right." Then he said, "Tell Hank to put him in his saddle and ride behind him."

Hank spoke quickly, angrily, "My horse won't carry double."

Stark shrugged, leaned quickly down and picked young Arnold up in his arms, walked over and placed him upright in the saddle on the big bay. He was thinking, "They have got me now—if they've got the nerve to start it." He mounted behind the saddle, holding young Arnold in his arms. He spoke to the girl, "Go on ahead." He was thinking, "They will fall in behind whatever I can do—and they can plug us both with one shot. But I don't want the girl shot." He spoke again to the girl sharply, "I said go on ahead."

For an instant a proud, defiant look came into the girl's face at Stark's sharp tone of command. Then she nodded and started her horse back down the way she had come. Stark followed, and after him came Hank and Whitey, the men Joe Palmer had "loaned" to the Arnolds.

Stark was thinking, "I hope he don't come to before we get to the ranch. The minute he starts talking they will start shooting." He felt depressed. "When he talks," he thought, "there will be a killing." And he denied to himself, half angrily, that he was thinking of wide violet eyes under a cloud of black hair.

The wide violet eyes were looking at him now. She was turned half around in the saddle, pointing with her gauntleted hand up the slope. "Those awful birds," she said, "I hate them."

Stark looked up at them. There were three buzzards there now, sitting with their filthy naked heads pulled down between their shoulders. Stark shrugged.

THE girl was busy with bloody water in a basin and clean white rags. She seemed to expect help from the three men in the room, but they paid no attention to her. Astonished, then resentful, then absorbed in her brother she was binding up the wound. Ted Arnold squirmed and his eyes fluttered. Stark's muscles tensed.

It was a corner room in the old adobe ranchhouse at the Double Circle. Worn, wide planks for a floor and whitewashed walls. Niches in the thick walls had, in old Spanish days, held religious statutes. There was a large brightly colored Navajo blanket on the floor and two Mexican serapes on the wall. On one of the serapes was woven the Arms of Mexico. The eagle grasped the snake directly over the head of Whitey. Hank sat farther along, against the wall, near the corner fireplace. An oil lamp on the little table by the bed illuminated the dusky hair and white blouse of Ann Arnold as she worked over her brother. Stark sat in a chair in the corner across the room, between two narrow windows. His hands were resting on his legs and he was glad he had tucked Ted Arnold's six-shooter inside the waistband of his overalls. He was thinking, "Buzzards. Buzzards."

There was an electrical tenseness in the air. A tenseness that was, obviously, getting on the nerves of the burly Hank. He shifted in his chair, his eyes sliding around at Stark, at the girl, then at the lamp. His eyes came away from the lamp and it could be seen he could not, at once, focus

his eyes on the shadowy corner where Stark sat waiting. Whitey sat under the eagle and snake, still, apparently indifferent, his reptilian eyes fastened on Stark in an unklinking stare. The lamp shone on his long yellow canine fangs.

Stark was thinking, "I've a minute now." Then he thought, "I wish there was some way to get the girl out of here."

The figure on the bed squirmed and sighed. The girl got up, put the basin of bloody water on the table and leaned over her brother, "Ted," she whispered. "Ted. Don't you know me?"

The eyes flickered and opened in a vacant stare. Hank fidgeted, started to get to his feet, then sat down. Under the strain his nerve was cracking. His fingers twitched and crooked and made a half motion toward his gun. Whitey turned his snake eyes on Hank in a long, unblinking stare. That seemed to quiet Hank for a little while.

The figure on the bed stirred and drew a deep breath. In a sleepy mumble he asked, "What is it?" Again Hank braced his feet and his face filled with blood.

SUDDENLY the girl seemed to lose her assured calm. Half hysterical she whirled on the three men sitting there in the lamp light. She seemed, for the first time, to realize the tenseness in the air, the threat of terrible things to come. "Oh, what is it? What is it?" she wailed. "Why do you sit there staring? What is it?"

She was asking Stark, but Stark did not take his eyes from the two men sitting against the other wall. He spoke quietly, half under his breath. "You go out in the other room. I'll take care of Ted."

Hank started to say something and then stopped to listen to the figure on the bed. Ted Arnold asked, "What happened?" Then his voice came again, quite clear this time. "What happened, Ann?"

Ann went on her knees beside the bed, "Oh, Ted," she moaned, "You were shot." Then the world seemed filled with her questions, "Who did it? Who shot you?"

And Stark thought, "Oh, God. Now!"

The figure on the bed started to speak, coughed and cleared his throat. Hank pulled his feet back against the chair and Whitey turned his unblinking eyes to the bed. Ted Arnold started again to say something and then they were all listening to a voice calling.

It must, Stark thought, have called several times before they could bring their tense attention away from what Ted Arnold was about to say. The voice called again, a blustery, hearty voice, shouting, "Hello the house." Then, "Hello, Ann." After a little the voice added, "Hello, Ted."

Stark thought, "Why didn't he call Ted first?"

Hank said, "That's Joe Palmer," and started to get to his feet. Whitey looked at him and he sat down.

Stark spoke to the girl, not looking at her. He ordered her, "Go let Joe Palmer in. Then stay out there."

The girl looked at Stark from troubled eyes. In the shadows the violet eyes seemed a dark purple. At last she nodded and went out.

Stark shot one swift look at Ted Arnold. Arnold was perfectly conscious now. He had turned his head to one side and was looking at Hank and Whitey. There was a strange look in his eyes. He did not seem to be conscious of the presence of Stark. Stark watched Arnold looking at the two men with the strange look in his eyes. Stark thought, "He knows!"

They listened, intently, to the girl opening a door. They heard the creak of saddle leather as a man left a saddle. Spurs rattled. They hear the voice of the girl, saying, "Yes. Shot. Ted was shot."

A blustery voice answered, "Ted? Shot? That can't be." Then the voice was lowered in tense anxiety, "Is he alive?" A minute later the voice seemed to whisper, "Does he know who shot him?"

The three men in the room ached in lis-

tening for the girl's answer. She said, "He was just going to tell us when you called." Then she said, "Come in. He can tell us now."

The girl pushed the door into the room and Stark was praying Palmer would not notice him, not at first. The girl came in first, then the heavy figure of Joe Palmer. Joe Palmer's eyes went swiftly to the bed and then to Hank and Whitey. They exchanged looks.

Palmer walked to the bed with Ann and began talking in a hearty, blustery voice, "Well, well, Ted," he said, "I hear you tried to stop a little lead. How come?" But Palmer's squinted, watchful eyes belied the heartiness of his voice.

Palmer laid a hairy arm across the slim shoulders of Ann Arnold and went on, "Well, you got a good nurse. I wouldn't mind being hurt myself if Ann would nurse me."

It gave Stark a profound satisfaction to see the way the girl slid out from under Palmer's arm.

Palmer kept on talking, rather hurriedly, as though to keep command of the situation, to keep anyone else from talking, not asking any more about the shooting.

He said, "Well, well, you'll be all right Ted. I'll be in tomorrow to see you. I got to get going now. Got to take Hank with me. Jest borrow him for one day." He turned and started for the door, saying, "Come on, Hank."

AND Stark saw the look that Palmer gave Whitey and the little nod of the head. Imperceptibly, Whitey nodded back, and Stark told himself, "Whitey is to do the killing after Palmer and Hank are gone."

Out of the shadowy corner Stark's voice came in a cold drawl, "Palmer," he said, "you better take Whitey too."

Palmer's breath came in a sharp hiss as he whirled, a gun in his hand, snarling, "Who's that?" Then, in a flat, dead voice, he stated a fact, "Stark! Stark of the Rangers!"

Stark's hands still lay on his legs as he looked at Palmer, drawling, "Yeah, Stark —of the Rangers."

Ted Arnold with a startled exclamation raised himself on one elbow, asking, "The Rangers?" Ann had turned swiftly to look at Stark and then at Palmer and her eyes suddenly widened in fright. Hank got very cautiously to his feet. Only Whitey, sitting under the eagle and snake, made no move. His whitish, reptilian eyes still stared at Stark.

Then there was an end of all sound and movement, as though all life had ceased in that room. Then Hank began to sway on his feet, his arm jerking and his fingers closing and unclosing. He began to slobber from loose lips. Suddenly his nerve cracked, he reached for a gun with a desperate yell of, "Whitey!"

All tenseness, all excitement left Stark and he was the deadly competent killer now. Half crouched in his chair, a gun in each hand he yelled at the girl, "Git under the bed! Damn you, git down," and saw Whitey very calmly shooting at Ted Arnold. Stark shot Whitey and the blow of the heavy .45 slug knocked him clean out of the chair. The girl screamed and climbed onto the bed, trying to cover her brother with her body.

Something struck Stark and turned him half around as the gun in his left hand spat and roared, but still Palmer kept on coming, shooting.

The room was dim with smoke now and the acrid smell of burned powder filled his nostrils. Stark shot again and saw Palmer staring at him, mouth open, surprised, dead on his feet.

And Hank was on a run, running, cursing, shooting wildly on his way for the door. He reached the door with a great lunge and caught the handle. Then as Stark's guns spit again it was as though Hank had changed his mind. He stood there a minute, his hand on the door, then

very slowly slumped down along the wall and sat there, staring from dead eyes at the lamp.

IT WAS three days later that John Stark, still stiff from his wound, was hanging his feet from the counter of the Sacatone Trading Company. He fished up a lump of brown sugar, watching the fat clerk with a look of sardonic amusement in his sombre eyes. He knew Fat wanted to ask questions but thought it impolite.

The fat clerk waddled around, then grumbled, "Why don't you buy that barrel of sugar, John?" Without waiting for an answer he said, "I hear you hired a Mexican woman and a couple of cowpunchers and sent 'em up to the Double Circle?"

Stark said, "Yeah. I did. They needed more hands up there."

Fat put on an air of abstract indifference, "I heard somebody say," he offered, "that Joe Palmer got killed?"

Stark said, "Yeah, Fat, Joe Palmer got killed all right."

Fat thought a minute, then in a vindictive voice he said, "Serves him right."

As Stark started out the door Fat asked, "Going down to Tucson now?"

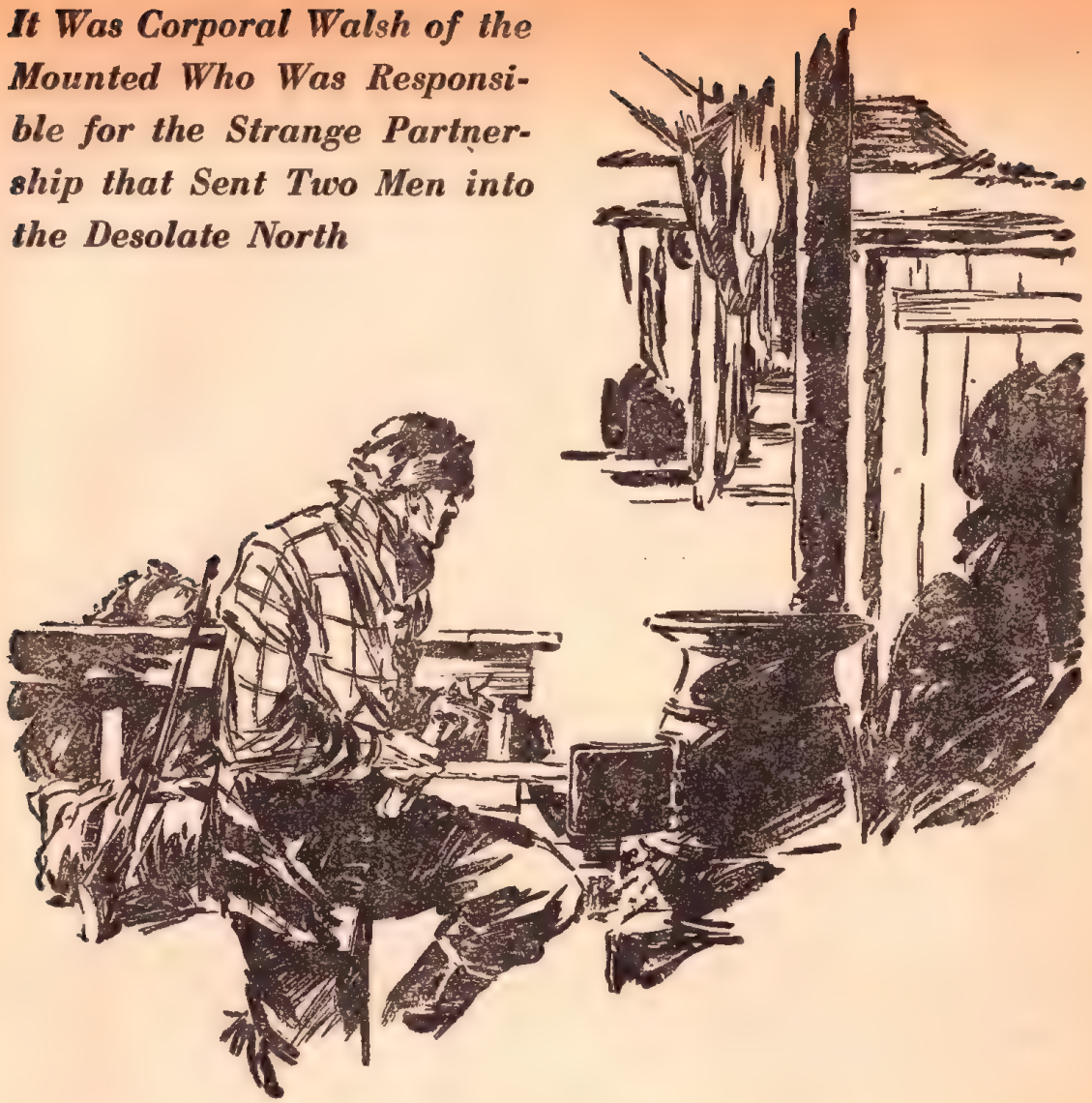
"Not now, Fat," Stark told him. "Going back to the Double Circle." He looked at the fat clerk and his hard face creased into a grin, "I find I left something up there, Fat."

Fat, interested, asked, "What'd you leave, John."

John Stark nodded his head at the clerk.

"You wouldn't ever have heard of it, Fat," he said. Then he added, "I left a heart up there."

It Was Corporal Walsh of the Mounted Who Was Responsible for the Strange Partnership that Sent Two Men into the Desolate North



Two Men—and a Mine

By J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "Trouble on the Hoof," "His Man Gets the Corporal," etc.

I

WOLVES—AND A WIZARD

THE rifle shots came intermittently, not bunched in a distress signal, more like a man shooting at irregular intervals at a target. Nobody but a very raw chechako would waste shells so far north. Bass was not much more than a tenderfoot himself, according to Northwest standards, but he had a hunch that something was wrong.

The impulse was enough to make him swing off his direct trail to the trading-post where he was bound for winter supplies, so that he could return to the deserted shack he now called his, and set his trapline.

In the summer he was a white-rock prospector, hunting free gold in quartz, no expert miner, banking on his luck. It had not been good.

For the two winters since he had come north from the States, dodging the depression for a land where chances might be brighter, help him to get his family off relief, enable him to marry the girl he left behind him, wolves and coyotes and carcajous had been plentiful, fur scarce. He had not found the free gold he was looking for.

He was unable to clear his debt to the Hudson's Bay store this spring, the little money he had brought in was long since gone, and he feared he would not be able to get fresh credit.

There was gold in that region. Sky cruisers got most of it, spotting the white-rock ledges from the air. In winter they were snow-covered and ice-bound.

John Bass was a sticker, but it looked as if he had come to the end of his not too long rope. He was close to gloomy despondency as he snowshoed his lonely trail over the harsh crust, crisp and fine as granulated sugar.

Winter was always long, and this year it had come early. The days were shortening, soon the sun would disappear.

The shots came again—two, widely spaced. Bass figured the man must be getting out of ammunition.

HE LEFT the short komatik he was hauling, with the last of his grub upon it, his pitiful catch of pelts, not enough to satisfy the dour Scotch factor at the Post. He took his rifle from its caribou-skin case, pumped a shell into the breech, and headed for the direction of the reports.

It was pretty cold, well under twenty below. The sky was leaden. There was snow in the air that might begin to fall at any minute.

Sound carried far. The man might be a mile away, or two, or three. It might turn out a fool's errand, like his gold hunting. Before John started back to his sled, his trail might be covered, the sled itself buried—lost.

Bass had lived long enough alone to get the habit of talking to himself, arguing with his own ego.

"You're a damned fool, John," he said aloud. "Looks, sometimes, as if you always *have* been. Must be in your blood. You'll find some old sourdough who'll curse you for butting-in, laugh at you for a tenderfoot sucker."

He knew he was going, anyway, before the next shot cracked. He would rather be a fool, than wrong, about a thing like this. The feeling that something was queer about the shooting was more than a mere hunch. A hunch was based upon records stowed away in the subconscious, that suddenly coördinated into consciousness when a master contact was made.

This was sheer intuition, conviction, or it might have been the reception of another man's desperate will, sending out an SOS in extremity.

Bass started going. A wind was beginning, a slow, steady wind that headed him, that began to roll over the icy snow-grains. It came from the north, and it meant another advance in the siege of winter. The temperature would drop, anywhere from ten to thirty degrees in its train, but before that there might be snow flurries. Any moment might see flakes sifting down out of the grayness.

And now there came a new sound down the wind. The howling of wolves, of a pack that had a quarry at bay and was slowly closing in. A sound infinitely terrible, that held savage hunger, the fierce and frightful suggestion of fangs tearing flesh and lapping blood, grating on bones, breaking and splintering them to get at the marrow.

Bass, holding on, with his spirit triumphant over the nerves that wanted to turn back to safety, the flesh that pimpled; was far enough emerged from the chechako chrysalis to know these things were sure indication of a sudden and long winter; that the caribou had known it, and gone south, that the wolves knew it.

Bass realized that wolves, contrary to tradition, rarely attack a man, that they slink off from gunfire, and do not always run in packs. But they might have found a quarry that was crippled, and their hunger lashed them on to play a waiting game, sitting on their haunches with shining eyes and slavering jaws, edging forward for the final rush.

If any of those shots had killed or wounded any of them, they would have been devoured, but it would not sate the others, only arouse their appetites with the weird bitters of fresh, hot blood.

There was a rise ahead of him, sparsely timbered with spruce. Beyond it, he knew the terrain sloped down over barrens and tundra to Silent Lake, where oil indications had been once investigated and abandoned.

There was no human habitation, no aid nearer than the Post—thirty long, arduous miles away.

IT WAS hard going. The granular snow curled over his racquettes and he had to lift the weight with every stride. He bent his head against the wind, and held to it.

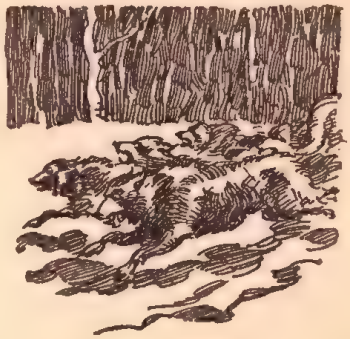
There came one more shot, with it the *yip* of a hurt wolf, that ended in a jumble of worrying, slobbering sounds.

Bass made for a gap in the trees. Now he was trailing the spoor the wolves had made as they had swept in from the east in an arc. By the mark of their pads, there was at least a score of them.

They might greet him with yelps of glee as they saw more meat, their viciousness roused beyond any fear. Bass stopped, fired his rifle. Followed that with a shout. It was partly a defiance, partly the thought that it might cheer the man facing hideous death. There was no answer, save the sudden silence of the wolves.

Bass was no hero, he told himself, but he was committed to a course, and he had a native tenacity that drove him on in the face of odds. This might be the wind-up of his expedition north. It was on the verge of utter failure, anyway.

Thoughts clicked and shuttled through his mind automatically stirred at such a moment. Then he saw the lean, furtive forms of the wolves as they made a forward shift. Some of them looked toward



him with a grim eagerness of welcome, jaws agape, tongues lolling with excitement. He sent a slug into the thick of them. It was snap-shooting, but it found a target. A gray shape rolled over, and the rest rushed it, in a wild flurry.

Bass had plenty of shells, and he was glad of that, while he wondered how many cartridges he might be able to use before he drove off the wolves, if such brutes ever got discouraged.

The man was huddled at the foot of a tree, a bundle of furs that made him look like a bear, motionless, but as he followed the movements of the wolves and saw Bass plowing up the ridge, his arms moved, his rifle thrust out from his hip, spat flame and lead.

Again a wolf rolled over, with a smashed leg, and again the rest surged over it, snarling and snapping. With incredible despatch they bolted their brother, hide, meat and bones, licked at the bloody snow, and rooted it with their muzzles to the last sanguine patch.

It gave time for Bass to reach the side of the man, who gazed up at him with a face that held no expression, that looked like parchment shrunk over the framework of a skull. It was the face of a Mongol, too far away from the Mackenzie

Delta to be Eskimo, a Chippewa of some tribe, probably a Dogrib. One eye was all white and gray, like the eye of a boiled fish, and the other had a bluish film over part of it.

The man was more than half blind with cataract, and he was very old. The parchment skin seemed crackled like ancient china.

The soul of him seemed to have retreated so far into its cosmos that all emotions had ceased to register in the face of a violent fate. With the arrival of Bass, some expression appeared struggling to make itself manifest, as a numbed hand may begin to grope, and grasp.

Bass had met a good many Indians, got along with them well enough. He had only a few words of Chippewyan, and he was not yet too adept with the Mackenzie River pidgin. The situation seemed to call for action, rather than conversation. He said, "How?"

The deep voice, coming from the thin and horny lips, was like the sound of a drum, vibrant and strong.

"Can do. Too bad you come. *Too many* wolf. Too hungry. Me, I fire um last shell. Me *old, you* young. More better you stay away. Young man no like to die. Me—Nyoka—die plenty soon anyway. Plenty sick. Dog all run with komatik. Wolf not get much meat with Nyoka."

A faint gleam back of the parchment, like a lamp lit behind a shade and then blown out, showed Humor looking at Death, and laughing first; in a way that braced Bass, stiffened him, and sent a tingle through his veins, even as he realized the inevitable.

Chechako-like, he had moved to save, and would remain to die.

Old Nyoka knew his wolves. The pack had moved in. They sat in a ghastly crescent, saliva dripping from their jowls, their tongues running in and out over their lower tushes.

"I've got plenty of shells," John said. "I'm pretty good shot, Nyoka. Maybe we get out. I got komatik little way off."

"No good. No can walk. Try catch-um dog. Leg too old, snap like dry twig. No can do."

"Nuts, I'll carry you."

Again there came that fleeting gleam.

"You good man," said Nyoka. "Maybe American?"

Bass nodded.

"Wolf no wait for you kill *too* many. Some not get fed. Bimeby, they rush. Come all-side. *Too* quick. Also, they eatum along each other, but they get too mad *you* kill-um. Suppose you go back, they all same rush you. No good."

"I'm staying, anyway, Nyoka."

Bass wondered if the old Indian's nerves were less sensitive than his own. Nyoka must have been watching those wolves for a long time, crippled, almost sightless, and he had mantled himself in a stoicism Bass could not acquire. The flesh crawled on his bones as he fought off something close to panic.

His imagination might be greater than Nyoka's, but was it? The ancient Chippewa must have seen many a wolf-pack hamstring a stalled caribou, over its hocks in snow, must know what their teeth could make of a mangled body. Just as Bass had seen them devour one of themselves.

A fire? If they had a fire, they might hold them off—for how long? And there was no chance of fire. He had no axe with him. The spruce was tall and thick. It was the nightmare ending of his fatuous dream. His folks—his love——"

He dropped another wolf. Shot through, the beast rolled, biting at its wounds.

And its fellows made no move toward it. Only the leader got off its haunches, advanced toward the two men, enemies as well as food.

The rest arose, spread themselves in a crescent, came on with dripping jaws, and eyes gleaming green and gold, up on their springy pasterns, ready for the rush.

BASS downed the leader, leaded him from muzzle to stern. But the rest came on. They crouched a little, muscles tense. He might shoot one more, club his rifle, and fight for life, but they would win, drag him down.

It was all over. He felt a sudden retrospect of life, a swiftly reversing of the film of his career. Only a red rage, a resolve to go down fighting.

"No good," said Nyoka. "Now they come."

And then Bass, unbelieving, saw the wolves flinch and cower. They squatted, looking up at the sky.

There was a roaring *whirr* there, swiftly growing louder. A great shape hurtled through the air, swooping down. In the grip of the impending tragedy, neither Bass nor Nyoka, his senses dulled with age and resignation, had noticed it before.

A plane, rigged with skiis, banking, side-slipping, under full control. To the wolves, perhaps, atavistic instinct recalled eagles, prehistoric flying creatures that carried off their cubs, fought with them over dead prey. This tremendous menace roused the craven that was in all their tribe. It sent them helter-skelter, scurrying like snow-rabbits under a sea-erne shadow, leaving their dead behind.

Bass felt his knees slacken at the melodramatic release. Yet it was well within the grounds of reason. As the annual report of the Canadian Mounted Police stated dryly, "It must be acknowledged that the use of airplanes in the opening up of this territory is very obvious."

That report had been an important part of Bass' scanty literature in his cabin. He had read it from cover to cover, a dozen times.

Passenger planes carried prospectors and others all over the Northwest and Yukon on regular schedules. Private planes on solo enterprises. Seaplanes of the Royal Canadian Air Force, allied with the Mounties. Sometimes Bass had heard one in the night, sighted one far off by day. Chaps in them scouting for his white quartz ledges.

He heard Nyoka's dry chuckle.

"White-man magic. Me shaman, I make magic. Wolf too strong, too hungry. Man more easy. Mebbeso my magic bring *you*. Not this skyboat. All same, damn glad it come."

Bass nodded, watching the plane making its landing, sweetly piloted, throwing up surface-snow like spume.

He was thinking of something held over from his high-school days, in the classics, the divinity appearing in the nick of time to work out the tangle in a Greek drama. *Deus ex machina*—that was it.

The *deus* in this case, a big man in a drill flying-suit and parka, swung out of the plane, came striding toward them. He thrust back his hood as he neared them.

"Close call that, eh? We saw what was up. Chivvied the *lobos*. They sure did scoot."

Bass was staring at him. The other stared back, took off his goggles, began to laugh.

"Well, I'll be good an' damned! Bass! Little Johnny Bass who came north to find his fortune. Did you make it, Johnny? This is sure the old long arm of coincidence. I told May that when I came up here, I'd give you her love, if I saw you. So I deliver the message. Got one to send back, Johnny?"

Bass felt his blood heating, his fists balling, as he looked into the mocking face of Hugo Meyer. Meyer, the gambler, who had made a play for his girl, who must have been seeing her after Bass left.

He hated being called Johnny, and Meyer had always known it. He had often said that his racket was getting sour in the States, that he might go north to the new mining camps.

"And when I do," he told them, "it will be by air, not tramping it like a bum."

Here he was. Bass knew he should

grateful to him but he found it hard to say so.

"Ah, forget it," said the gambler. "It was just one of the breaks. What's wrong with the Siwash? Partner of yours?"

II

"JINGLE BELLS"

"NOTHING doing, Jimmy. This is a two-passenger plane. I'll take you in to the Post but I'm not going to take the Indian. He's as good as dead now. You're liable to be, too, before you make the Post. If this snow thickens you'll never make it. We got to be going before that happens. Don't be a damned fool. It's you or him."

"Startin' to snow already," said the pilot laconically. He was taking no part in the talk. Meyer had chartered the plane. It was his sayso. The chechako was nuts if he didn't take the chance. The wolves might come back.

"I'm sticking," said Bass. "It's not your fault if you can't take the two of us. I'll stay with Nyoka."

The shaman huddled at the foot of the tree, taking it all in, watching the sky, the wind in the spruce tops. Saying nothing, watching the play that meant life or death for him.

Meyer shrugged his shoulders.

"Suit yourself, Johnny. You can't say I didn't make the offer. If I don't see you again, I'll tell May I delivered her message. Any to go back?"

Eyes danced tauntingly in the deadpan face.

"You can go to hell," Bass said sincerely.

Meyer laughed, got into the plane. The pilot made contact, stepped on the powerful self-starter. The blades bit the air, the skis skidded over the surface, slid, lifted, and the ship swung off, banked into the wind, headed for the Post, making leeway but going strong. The flakes that were now coming in a flurry soon hid her from sight. The drone of her died out. The two were left in the wilderness.

"More better you go," said Nyoka.

"I'm taking you in, on my sled. I can haul it."

As he spoke, Bass wondered if he could find the komatik. His tracks were already obliterated.

"No can walk. No can live long. Everybody plenty sick my village. Catchum flu'. Magic no good. White doctor no come. Mountie no come. Too many village all same sick. Me sick too. Bimeby everybody die. I go along 'nother village. All same. Too sick. I try to go to Post. Then feel bad. Dog run, wolf come. Nyoka very old. Soon go sleep, no wakeum."

"I'm taking you in," Bass repeated, as much to himself as the shaman. "At least, we'll have a shot at it. I'll tote you to the sled."

THE weight of the old man was nothing. He was just skin and bones. But Bass had to get him on his back, and he had a broken leg. The bones must have grated but Nyoka made no moan.

"Snow not last very long," he said. "Mebbeso too long. You no come this way. Now you go left."

If it had not been for Nyoka, Bass would never have found his sled. It was just a small hump when he stumbled to it. Only the shaman's instinct, the fact that he had watched Bass making for the spruce even while he fought off the wolves, brought them there.

They were in a tough spot. One tenderfoot and a crippled Indian, no dogs, the light, such as it was, dimmed by the snow; hemmed in, beleaguered by the relentless spirit of the North, ever resentful of invasion. Bass could not haul the komatik through that gray softness, even if he threw away all he had on it.

He made Nyoka as comfortable as he could, set up a screen to hold the snow,

gave the Indian most of the half-bottle of whisky he had saved all through the summer, for emergencies.

It brought Nyoka out of the lethargy into which he was sinking, brought back the pale gleam to his one seeing eye. He began to talk.

"Wind shift," he said. "Snow stop soon. Bass hoped he was right. He took a sup of the liquor himself. Nyoka went on, level-toned, like drumbeats. "When snow stop Nyoka be dead. You lookum white rock, catchum gold?"

"I look," Bass told him. "No catch."

"Where you live. You got shack?"

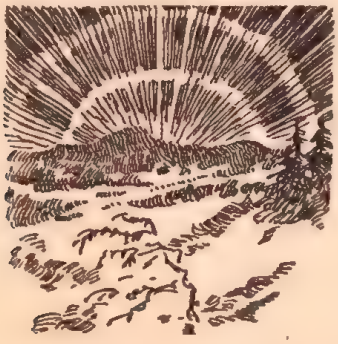
Bass described his cabin location, humoring the native. They might as well talk.

"Plenty savvy. North side find um li'l' lake, over hummock with dead tree, like this."

He feebly held up both his hands, five fingers erect on one, two on the other.

"All same seven tree in row. Indian call Seven Tree Lake. White rock not far from there. Go halfway between north an' east. Coal too along that place. Mebbeso oil. Some place smell stinkum."

Nyoka knew the spot all right, Bass thought. There were coal deposits, natural gas, probably oil, all over the Mackenzie Basin. One spouting gas geyser that had been burning for years on the east bank of the river. Mostly undeveloped, uncertain, the coal pretty soft. But good enough to burn in his stove at the cabin. He could dig it right out of the hummock the shaman mentioned.



It interested him right now more than the talk of gold. He wished the two of them were back at the shack, with the iron stove glowing, throwing out heat and life. To hell with gold he would never see—he had warmed himself at that stove!

"Gold no good for Indian," the shaman monotoned. "Make um get drunk, make um fight, make um kill. Then white man hang. Not much good white man sometime. White man find this white rock I tell you. Indian know long time. That white man take in gold to Post. He get drunk, all same. Somebody kill him, take um gold, but no savvy where white rock. Suppose Indian find gold, show gold, white man take all same. Mebbeso this white rock I speak *too* bad for *you*. Mebbeso spirit of dead man still along that place. No likeum 'nother man to take."

"I'd take a chance on it, if I got a chance at it. I don't believe in ghosts."

"All same plenty ghost. Nyoka savvy that too much. Soon Nyoka ghost."

His voice was dying down, the tempo of the vocal drumbeats slowing.

Bass gave him more whisky. It dribbled down the lean throat that ceased to swallow it. The lower jaw fell slack.

Nyoka had gone to his fathers.

And he had paid his debt to the chechako who had come to his rescue, if Bass ever got a chance to cash in on the incomplete directions.

Unless Nyoka's ghost made magic for him.

THE snow was letting up, as Nyoka had predicted, and Bass had not believed.

The flakes were slower, smaller, farther apart. The visibility heightened.

Bass took half of what was left in the bottle, set the body of the shaman on the komatik amid his pelts, set out for the Post on compass course.

It was hard hauling, but he held on. He could not leave the corpse to the

wolves, nor even to the weather. Meyer would, without compunction, but he was not Meyer.

And now, with any luck, he would make his strike. It was not winter yet. Only a forewarning. He ought to be able to get back to the cabin, hunt for the white rock ledge, find it, before the final snows covered it. Once found, he could work it, winter or no winter. Blast the stuff, pick out the free gold from the pay-chunks, like meat out of a walnut. He wished Nyoka had said how far to go northeast from Seven Tree Lake. But it was a lead. He would find it. He had a fantasy that the ghost of the shaman hovered over him, wishing him luck, making magic before it went to the Happy Hunting Grounds, if the Chippewas had any in their mythology.

The kick of the whiskey died down. It was hard going. He was getting tired. It was a long way to the Post.

Unless he got a new debt, fresh supplies, he could not go back to the cabin. The dour factor would not give them on the rumor of white rock, the tale of a dead Indian. He heard such tales all the time. Even if Bass could tell just where the ledge lay, he would have to prove it before they would listen to him.

It was getting cold again, as he plugged on doggedly, beginning to talk to himself again, his ears cocked for wolfery.

"You're just a sucker, John, always will be, to the end. Looks like that might be coming."

It was still getting colder, darker, or he thought it was. Compass work, without bearings, was chancey. There was deviation—but if he hit the river he would be all right. If he could hold out. He needed hot grub, tea, a warmed-up slab of the cooked beans with pork he had in a canvas poke. He couldn't eat it cold, might as well try to chew quartz. No wood, not till he reached the river.

There was a little more whiskey, but Bass knew that was tricky fuel for a human engine. It flared up, gave you a burst of energy, then let you down. He must save that for the final spurt.

On, on, and on. Meyer would go back to the States—unless he was wanted there. That was likely enough. There had been talk. Talk Bass had not carried to May Britten. But Meyer would work the gold camps, the radium-camps, he would make money, fix things, return. And he would never tell May he had seen or heard of Bass. Not him. He posed as a sport—of course he had offered to take Bass in, could hardly do less, with the pilot along. Nyoka had died, after all. He was on the sled, his body, anyway. And he, Bass, was hauling it.

Why? Every extra pound added to the strain in his calf muscles, getting to be agony, threatening cramps — and that *would* be the end.

Nyoka had said it was easy to die. You just let yourself go to sleep. He could do that, easy enough. Nyoka had passed out quietly. No pain. Just lie down, get warm, go to sleep.

Damned if he would! He'd get to that ledge of white rock, somehow, peck out the gold, peck it out, peck it out.

Colder. No sign of the river. No sign of anything but gray waste, gray ground, gray sky.

How about the last of the whiskey? No —not yet. It might not spur him, might make him more sleepy than he was. God, how sleepy. Carry on, John Bass. Keep plugging. Don't quit, don't lie down on the job——

What if he'd missed the river? That damned compass!

A dying man hauling a dead one. White man hauling Indian. That was funny. Funny as a crutch—two crutches.

He stumbled, slurring his lifts of the snowshoes. They weighed a ton. Things were beginning to blur. Stick it out, John.

The tinkle of bells came through to him, to his numbing brain.

"Jingle-bells, jingle-bells, jingle all the way."

That was funny. Sleigh bells! Back home. Santa Claus.

"'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house."

You're licked John. Licked! Too played-out to get at the last of the whiskey.

It 'ud only prolong the agony. The bells again.

Jingle-jingle-jingle!

Real agony stabbed his calves, inside his thighs. He had burned out. He stubbed his right snowshoe, crossed both racquettes, pitched forward, motionless, on his face.

Now he was gulping whiskey. No it was hot tea, with whiskey in it, from a thermos bottle.

"You're doin' fine, Bass. You're all right. Meyer told us about you and the Indian. 'Twas a fine idea of yours that, a brave idea, but foolish. Take another sup of this. 'Tis all right you are. There's none of you frozen. We'll take you in, an' what's left of old Nyoka.

We would have got around to him, but the flu's been raisin' the devil in the villages."

The friendly voice flowed on. The laced-tea flowed down his throat. The dogs on the Post team shook their heads and their bells jingled. Bass vaguely took in the reassuring talk.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Walsh, of the Mounted. Quit talkin' now. Snug down. 'Tis but an hour to the detachment. You were headin' fine. We'll have you all bunked down with a full belly, in no time at all."

The Mounties. Meyer had tipped them off. Not such a bad sport, in spots, Meyer.

Bass fell asleep. Blanketed, drawn over the snow by the Post-bred huskies, fur-to-leather, bells *jingling—jingling—jing—*

III

STRANGE PARTNERS

CORPORAL TIM WALSH looked from the desk where he was working on a report as Bass came in, weary and dispirited, sagged into a chair.

"Any luck?" asked the corporal, in charge of the detachment, two constables under him.

"MacNear won't give me any fresh debt. He took what I had, and I still owe him close to two hundred. I told him about the ledge and Nyoka, and he laughed at me. The man's like a stone."

"Don't be too hard on him. He's got a job, and he wouldn't have it if he didn't turn in a gain. And don't tell too many about that ledge, they might find it ahead of you."

"I'm licked, looks like," said Bass. "I might get a mucker's job."

"The mines are bein' worked by their owners," said the corporal, "will be, until they're developed. They're rich enough, some of 'em. Plenty loose money in the camps, an' spent at the detachment here. But don't get down-hearted, stick around."

"I can't bum on you. I'm flat. MacNear took my last skin."

"I'll scout round a bit. I might find someone to grubstake you. Take it easy. By the way, the doctor says Nyoka could not have lived. The pneumonia had him when you found him. He was too old an' weak to fight it."

There was no regular doctor at the detachment. The sick got treated at either the Anglican or the Catholic mission. The man who had looked after Bass, and done his best for Nyoka, was a scientist, an anthropologist studying the Indian tribal relations and customs of the Mackenzie River delta and eastern Alaska, who had studied medicine and surgery to make his work efficient.

"Take it easy," Walsh said. It was

sound advice, but not easy to take, Bass thought.

Walsh was a swell egg. And MacNear was within his rights. The factor was a shrewd Scot working for his Company, as well as his own advancement. He rented the detachment buildings to the Mounties who rarely owned their own quarters.

Bass felt tired, body and brain. The haul had taken a lot out of him. Walsh eyed him keenly and sympathetically.

"Go take a snooze," he said. "I'll call you for supper."

But when the corporal went into the bunk-room, Bass was sleeping soundly, and Walsh left him there.

"Keep his grub hot, Michael," he told a constable. "He's had a bit of a setback today. He did a man's job yesterday. I'll be goin' down to Pierre's. They're drinkin' too deep an' playin' too high down there to suit me. We want no trouble at the Post. That Yank, Meyer, needs a warning."

HE SLIPPED on his snowshoes, went through the still night toward the river, at the edge of the settlement. Pierre Regnier was a quarter-breed Indian, slick in many ways, suspected of many things, with nothing definite proved against him.

He would, Walsh believed, buy furs without being too fussy about their real ownership. He found women to entertain the miners who drifted in to the detachment, and the trappers; but immoral traffic could not be pinned on him, though the corporal did not think Pierre would be in on any sort of a deal without getting his share.

The corporal entered the front room of Pierre's cabin, nodded at the fat woman, who was Madame Regnier with all the frills of Catholic matrimony, the only person Pierre was afraid of. She was back of the crude bar, serving two men, Post *habitants*.

From the inner room there came a steady babble of words, of exclamations, laughs, curses.

"Hitting it up a bit, tonight," suggested Walsh, lounging on the bar. "Pierre works you too hard, Marie. Don't lose your looks."

She gave him a smile, but there was no mirth in it. She knew Walsh spoke French but she used what she thought was English.

"Wan time you might say that, Caporal. Not now." She rolled her head on the thick neck toward the back. "Eet ees that Americane who mak' the play so high. I no *like*. Pierre, he git the kitty money—" Her shrug was eloquent.

"I'll take a looksee, Marie. The way to stop trouble is not to let it start."

Marie looked after the stalwart yet lithe figure of the corporal with an ancient longing, not yet dead, but lacking hope.

"He has a fine back, that one," she sighed to herself.

They were drinking "caribou" at the stud-poker table. Native wine, like heady port, mixed half and half with straight alcohol. Liquid dynamite. In the stuffy room, with the chances of the game helping the excitement, it fumed and fired the brain.

For the moment they did not notice Walsh. Not even Pierre, dealing stud. The corporal took in the stakes, estimating the value of the chips, noting the bills and coins. This was a showdown, four men still in, after the cards were out.

He saw Meyer, with his deadpan face, half-closed eyes, long-fingered hands setting out a stack of browns, worth ten dollars apiece, poised, imperturbable. Pierre, avid for the kitty money he got without risk, the players who had tossed-in, the three who still thought they might win.

Walsh knew who was going to win.

Only one man matched Meyer's bet, a

Norwegian trapper named Niilson, a giant of a man, always successful with his skins. A breed woman sat back of him, comely but none too clean in her finery, a sly bit, hoping to hook Niilson permanently.

"Fool house," cried Niilson, showing his holed king. "Tree keeng, two eight."

"*Fool* house it is," said Meyer. "I've got the fourth six-spot. I collect."

The breed-woman jabbered. Niilson pounded the table until chips and coins jiggled.

"Count the cards," he shouted. "By God, you'll find *five* sixes in this pack! He slip one in. Look how he bet at the start."

"To bring you in, you come-on," said Meyer, every syllable a sneer. "You trying to say I cheat?"

"I say count the cards."

"That's the same thing, squarehead. Take it back."

Niilson was afire with the caribou, with his losses, which would clean him out, with the knowledge that, lacking money, he would lose the girl.

"Damn you, *no!* I say you *cheat.* An', by God, I break every bone in your body!"

The women squealed, drew back to give room, to look on, primitively feminine. Pierre started to rise, and the man next to him shoved him back.

"Stay out of this."

Meyer's deadpan showed nothing on the surface. Only his eyes widened. Niilson rose, starting to heave the table out of his way, towering, berserk.

Meyer's right hand stayed on the table. His left was the better at many things, though he did not disclose that fact, save in time of need. Now his left shot across his chest to where a gun was snugged in a shoulder-holster by his right armpit.

"Hold it. Steady all. *Steady!*"

Walsh, gun in hand, covering them all, especially Meyer, chilled their excitement like a cold blast of Arctic air, with the voice of ultimate, absolute authority. It showed assured in his pose, not loose but facile, tense with the coiled tension of a spring ready to release.

"Now sit down, an' take it easy," the corporal went on, not raising his voice. "All hands in the open. Never mind the cards. I'm not talkin' of them. The game's off, boys. An' we'll call the last bet off. There'll be no inquest, of that sort."

Pierre began to bluster.

"I might be askin' where you got the alky you're mixin' in your caribou tonight," Walsh warned. "The rest of you, disperse; in the King's name. That would mean nothin' to you, Meyer, so you stay awhile. I want to talk to you and Pierre."

They slung out, furtively, boldly, defiantly, but they went. It was not Corporal Walsh they obeyed so much, as what stood back of him.

Presently the three men were alone.

"Pierre," said Walsh, "you'll be keeping down the stakes, regardless of how they sweeten your house-kitty. We don't want this high gambling going on in the detachment. Or you might lose your license. As for you, Meyer, the same thing goes. I don't know whether you worked in an extra six——"

"I don't have to ring in anything on these suckers——"

"I'm talkin', Meyer. I haven't looked up where you came from, or why. 'Twould be easy enough, with you flyin'. We have radios up here. You might have overlooked that."

"I'm not overlooking a thing, policeman. You've got nothing on me. I came in legally, as an American citizen."

"Sure. I'd not be botherin' Ottawa without cause. This is just local. You're a gambler. But you don't want to do what these men you play with do, to earn their money. Yours comes soft. They make it, then you take it. We don't want men like you in our settlements and camps, Meyer. You'll find the goin' hard. Why not take a *real* gamble, if you're not afraid of puttin' callouses on those soft, slick hands of yours?"

Pierre had disappeared, to explain volubly to Marie what had happened, getting small comfort.

"You can't fool the Mounties," she said. "Long ago I tell you that. You get too greedy, Pierre. It does not pay."

He slapped her across the face, sat down with a brandy bottle.

"Are you propositioning me?" Meyer asked Walsh, his tone a covert insult. His muscular, heavy body was a contrast to that of the tall, straight strong and smiling Walsh.

"We just don't speak the same language, Meyer," the policeman said quietly. "You don't understand the situation. This country is bein' developed for the good of its citizens, an' we don't aim to let outsiders come in an' skim the cream. I don't say you were chisellin' Niilson. You're a smart one. That's one trouble with you. You're too smart.

"I've got my orders. If you don't want to tune-in I can report you. You might get deported. That would depend on what they said about you in Fort Richards, where you flew from, and your record in the States."

"Look it up."

"Time enough, perhaps. You didn't report your arrival here at the detachment, for registry Meyer. You know that regulation. Slips like that would count against you."

"What's this *real* gamble you're talkin' about?"

"It's Bass. And the old shaman, Nyoka. He was grateful to Bass, with cause. He knew Bass was lookin' for white-rock gold—free gold in quartz matrix. Nyoka knew where there is a reef of it, a ledge. He wouldn't touch it himself for plenty of good reasons. He was a wise man, and he knew gold an' Indians don't mix. But he told Bass where it can be found."

"Sounds like the old hokum to me. The States is full of those yarns."

MEYER affected to jeer but his eyes were slits. He was clearly considering the proposition, weighing it carefully, seeing some things in it that had not appealed to him at first.

"Bass needs a grubstake. He's got to get to his shack before snow flies. I know these Indians, Meyer. You don't. Nyoka didn't lie, and he wouldn't be wrong."

"I'm no miner." Apparently, Meyer thought, Bass had said nothing about their previous acquaintance. Neither had he, though not for the same reason. The idea of Bass was not to talk about anything that might bring in May.

"You don't have to be." There was a trickle of contempt in the corporal's voice. "This is free gold. Bass'll probably do most of the work."

"Where is the damn' place—to hell and gone, I suppose?"

There was a certain smugness about the request that offset the grumbling phrase. Walsh remembered that, later. Much later.

"'Tis the back of beyond, after snowfall, an' when the sun goes. You'll have ninety-odd days without any sun. You may get to hate the sight of each other, the sound of each other's voice. We get that way sometimes on a long patrol. But it's a good gamble for a game sport."

"We might make a deal," said Meyer

grudgingly. "He's up at the barracks, ain't he?"

"Yes. You could come up in the mornin'. I'll have a chat with him first."

"Figure yourself his guardian?"

"I figure myself the guardian of every man who's inside the law, Meyer."

So it happened that Corporal Walsh linked up a strange pair of partners.

III

FREE GOLD

MEYER had the conscience of an octopus, the cold calculation of the professional gambler. And a sardonic streak of humor.

His most human attributes were greed and jealousy. He wanted the money, and he wanted the girl, none too sure of her.

If Bass made his pile, he could go back, the odds high in his favor with May Britten. If Meyer staked him, he would get half of the strike, but he nevertheless would be helping Bass get the girl.

It was quite a nice problem. Meyer let it ride. There was no use playing a game before the stakes were on the board.

He put up a specious show of good-will with Bass.

"Mind you, I know nothing about mining," he said, "but I'm a gambler. I'll take a chance. I'm not such a bad sort, Bass. If we win, you can go back to the States and marry May. I never had any real show with her, because I play cards for a living. So, how much do you need?"

Bass came out of his slump. He looked at the deal through rose-colored glasses. He was not a fool; he did not trust Meyer too much but he figured he could handle him. Here, at the end of his own rope, Meyer had thrown him another, a lifeline. He would be a chump not to grab it.

"I'll have to pay off my old debt," he said. "That would come out of my share first, of course. Then we'll need grub, some proper clothes for you, some gear, forty-per-cent dynamite, fuse, caps. I'll make a list."

Meyer watched him. The amount was less than he had imagined. He made some additions for his own comfort, liquor from Pierre, for one thing.

"I can cook a bit," he said. "Take care of the shack, do what I can to help out generally. I suppose I could get in the wood. We'll need lots of that, I suppose."

"No wood. Coal. Right outside the shack. All right for heating, no good for smelting, or anything like that. We'll get out enough before the deep freeze comes. Even then we could blast it."

"Sounds good to me. Good stove?"

"Yep."

"When do we start?"

"We ought to go in tomorrow. We'll have to haul in. Unless you want to run to a few dogs. Might pick up three or four. We can always sell them again."

"Get 'em. But I'm a novice at handlin' 'em."

"Don't worry about that end of it. There's the list, with my debt. Dogs will run three or four hundred more."

"It's a go. Shake on it, Johnny."

Walsh came in. The plane had just left, taking out mail and reports. Meyer suggested a drink to bind the bargain. Walsh excused himself. Bass was eager to see the factor, and said to make it later. Meyer went by himself to Pierre's, to arrange about his private supply for the trip.

"Well," said Walsh, "you've got your stake. But I don't trust that bird too much. There are those I do trust, word and judgment, who believe he cheated at cards. He's quick with a gun. If you make a strike, watch him."

Bass was about to say he had known Meyer before but checked himself. It

did not seem worthwhile, and he was keen to get started.

"He's not such a bad sort," he said, "using Meyer's own phrase. "He got you to come after me and Nyoka."

"A fine skunk he'd have been if he didn't. As a matter of fact it was the pilot, and Meyer knew he'd mention it, if he didn't himself. But you've got your grubstake. Good luck to you!"

IT WENT well at first. They bought a Mackenzie River sled, with a curved prow like a toboggan, to breast the snow. They got four huskies. If Meyer shirked, Bass set it down to the fact that the gambler was more of a chechako than he was.

Meyer took solo drinks, but Bass used it only as medicine. And Meyer proved a good cook. He let Bass do all the hunting for the white-rock ledge, taking it easy in the shack playing solitaire.

The cabin was well built enough, though snow, fine as salt, was often blown through the tiny chinks between the logs, as the winter set in. The sun failed to rise above the horizon, and they had only moon and stars, with sometimes the flaming, crackling banners of the Northern Lights, outside of the kerosene—that Bass tried his best to conserve, and Meyer wasted.

Meyer was lazy. The float-coal was fine fuel, and kept them warm, even when it dropped to sixty below, but the stovepipe fouled with coal tar and Meyer neglected to clear it, as he did to re-chink the bad places in the logs.

His real nature began to reveal itself when Bass failed to discover the ledge. He wasted food as well as oil; he would have wasted the coal if the supply had not been practically inexhaustible. Bass suspected that he cooked himself a big meal in the middle of the day, when Bass was slugging hard beyond Seven Tree Lake in the bitterest of weather, striving to find the ledge, sometimes when every breath seemed to sear the lungs, or in miniature blizzards, knowing that unless he found it soon, the snows would bury it beyond discovery—and getting only the sketchiest of suppers.

It was hard to tell whether a meal was breakfast, dinner or supper, save for the clock. Day and night were the same. Stars or moon shone at noon, when the sky was clear.

Bass began to realize how sketchy Nyoka's directions had been—nothing but a compass line, without definite bearings. His furs got ragged, the keen wind seeped through the rips, and burned his body with frostbite. Mittens and mukliks wore thin, and had to be repaired. Meyer refused to loan his, staying snug in the shack.

Twice Bass saw caribou sign. The last time he followed it, and shot three. The coarser meat was for the dogs. Meyer took the choice cuts, and gobbled them when he was alone.

There is an old saying north of the Arctic Circle that only Christ and the Devil could stay together through an Arctic winter without quarreling, the Devil because of his sardonic humor, and Christ because of his ability to perform miracles.

The time came when Bass called a halt on the profligacy of Meyer. The situation was getting serious. The spirit of the far North, ever resentful of man's presence, once it was allied with hunger, would set serious siege to them—and win.

BASS was dog-tired, more tired than any of the dogs he seldom used, which lived an easy life. Meyer had dished him up beans and tea and scorched bannock biscuit, when he came in, then claimed he himself was not hungry. The only thing that worried Meyer was that his liquor was getting low. He was in an ugly mood.

Bass lit his pipe after his unpalatable meal, held himself in, knowing his own irritation, sensing that of Meyer like a smoldering fire.

"We've got to have a straight talk," he said. "We've seen the last of the caribou. There'll be nothing but wolves from now on. Unless we eat the dogs. We've got a long way to go, and we've *got* to go easy on the grub."

"I paid for it. Go roll your hoop! Or find that gold of yours. That was some fairy tale you pulled on me, when you were down-and-out, and wanted to make sure of being fed this winter. Spent my stake to make a bum out of me, same as yourself."

"That's not true, Meyer. You talked with Walsh. You said it was a good gamble. I'm doing all I can to locate the gold."

Meyer snarled. He had emptied a bottle, wanted to open another, was afraid to use it up.

He was afraid of this silence, of the utter wilderness, the cold that smote at him whenever he went outside. This was not the life he craved, without excitement, without excess.

"To hell with Walsh! And to hell with you, you piker! You're just a white-chip player, Johnny. Even your girl knows that. If she ever *was* your girl."

Bass' nerves were raw. He was worn thin, physically and mentally. He knew this man for a crook, even if he were his partner.

"Just what do you mean by that, Meyer?"

"Figure it any way you want to, Johnny. Suppose she's going to wait for you forever? Suppose she didn't amuse herself with someone who'd give her a good time? She's young, Johnny. Youth will be served."

"She'd never marry you. You said it yourself."

"But she might amuse herself with me, Johnny. Ever think of that? She's human."

To Bass, away from the girl he loved, she had in his dreams acquired something of divinity, as is the way with wanderers. And his deep-centered belief in her purity was strong. He might be a piker, she might begin to think him a failure, but she had never played with Meyer, sitting there grinning, reeking of whiskey, unmasked.

He threw his glowing pipe at Meyer, out of self-control. That day despair and failure had gripped him.

"You lie, you swine; you lie, and you know it!"

The acid of days and days when he knew Meyer—aside from the money he had put up, gypped from men less canny than he was in the chances of cards—was reneging deliberately as a true partner, ate through.

"You'll take that back. Now! Or I'll choke it out of you!"

The shack was over-hot, fumed with coal-gas. It blurred Bass' brain as he upset the unsteady table, and lunged at Meyer.

Meyer was fat, flaccid, partly drunk, but he shucked the holster-gun he wore continually, night and day, pulled trigger.

The bullet clipped away the helix of Bass' ear, drummed a message of death into him. He caught Meyer's wrist with his left hand, smashed his right to Meyer's unshaven jaw, missed the point as the gambler brought up his knee, and the second slug went through the roof.

Pain streaked through Bass like flame in oil-soaked wood. In his agony he ground the gun-wrist of the gambler until the small bones grated, and the gun fell to the floor. Bass kicked it aside through a red mist of pain. He flung his wiry weight on the other, bore him down. His conscious and subconscious minds clashed, and his determination drove him in an outburst of righteous fury, like the discharge of a dynamo.

He sat astride the fallen gambler's chest and jolted him left and right on his rolling jaw. He heard himself shouting, "Take it back you liar, take it back!"

Meyer went limp, knowing he was licked, yet still venomous, biding his time. He blew froth from his bluing lips.

"Listen, Johnny, you're crazy. I quit. I take it back. Ah, for God's sake, I was drunk! You know I've been drinkin'. I'll cut it out. It's this damned loneliness! I didn't mean it, Johnny. Not a thing. I lied—*I tell you—I lied* —don't kill me——"

Bass took his fingers away from Meyer's throat where they had clamped. He might have murdered him. Perhaps he had.

He got up, swaying, dizzy, staggered to the door, and opened it. The night was clear as crystal, the snow broomed smooth, the air an elixir as it gushed into the cabin, the stove roared, glowing red, and he drew the keen oxygen into his lungs.

MEYER was being sick as a dog that has eaten its harness. Bass dragged him to the door, rubbed snow-grit on his face, hauled him back, closed the door. Then he saw Meyer's gun, picked it up, opened the door once more, and hurled the weapon out into the drifts, saw it dive through a sharp crust.

Clarity of mind, of vision and sense, returned. For all the contact with the outside air, his brow was running sweat.

Almost he had killed—had wanted to kill. Tales he had heard of Arctic patrols flooded his mind and caused revulsion. Of how men—close chums—had turned on each other. He and Meyer had never been that, never could be, but Meyer had put up his money when he—Bass—was down and out—and he—Bass—had failed to make good.

Meyer had shot at him, and he—Bass —might have done the same, if he had not put aside his own gun when he came in. It was in its holster, belted round the bunk-post.

He got the gun, broke it, put the cartridges back into his belt. He was sane now. Meyer might bear a grudge. And he was infinitely tired, body and soul.

There was truth in what Meyer had said. He was a failure—May had a right to say so. But she would never have said it.

He got Meyer into the lower bunk, where he snored and slumbered. There were marks on his throat, there would be bruises on his jaw. And Bass' shirt was red and wet with blood, though his ear had stopped bleeding, from the cold.

Meyer had his remaining bottles of liquor in his bunk. Bass had felt them there when he put the gambler to bed.

He uncorked one of them, took a long drink, then another. It made him feel a lot better, restored his general equilibrium. Then he put the bottle away, refilled the pipe he retrieved, put some coal on the stove, and sat smoking, thinking things out.

Presently he took the picture of May Britten from his wallet, studied the fair face, that seemed imbued with truth and trust, read the inscription.

With love and luck—always—from May!

The metal clock said it was dawn. Bass wound it, Meyer was still oblivious, breathing stertorously. He cooked himself a meal of sowbelly, canned tomatoes,

dehydrated potatoes, flapjacks and coffee.

After that he looked outside. The Aurora swirled in loops of glory. The dogs, buried, were asleep. He did not need them. He felt strong, urgent, inspired. There was the place, on the weather side of a rocky ridge, where the float was uncovered by the wind, that he felt was his last chance, where he had glimpsed rotten stuff, not white, but discolored, that might be quartz, might be gold-bearing float.

He had been too tired, too discouraged, to probe it. Now, with May's picture inside his parka, wishing him luck, he meant to try it out. He took along some sticks of dynamite, thawed-out in the cabin, fused and capped.

The reef was pitted, cavitied, eroded into horizontal layers by ice that swelled and melted in the short summer.

He hacked deep with his prospector's hammer, set his blasts, tamped them with fragments of quartz, packed with snow, lit his fuses, retired, and waited until the dull explosions told him to come and get the answer.

AN HOUR later he burst into the cabin, shook Meyer by the arm, roused him, dragged him from his bunk.

"Struck it," Bass cried. "Rich! The rock is lousy with free gold—there's tons of it. Look at this!"

Meyer looked, and sleep fled from him. His aches and bruises were forgotten. What he remembered in that exultant moment of the quarrel of the night before and its outcome was temporarily dismissed.

They had won! Ready to cash in. Gold like flecks of butter, unshining, dull, but fraught with wealthy gold rusty with oxide but still precious, showed as it crumbled in Bass' strong fingers as he broke down the specimens that he had brought.

"Looks like we win, by God," said Meyer—and knew he meant *I* win. "For Pete's sake give me some coffee, with a stick in it."

"I'll take one myself," said Bass.

They shook hands, and drank together, linked by gold—free gold!

IV

FIFTY THOUSAND FOR ONE

NOW Bass had no more cause to complain of Meyer. He worked with him until both were ready to drop, so hard that Bass took pity on him and did all the cabin chores, cooking the three hot meals they took, keeping the fire banked.

The ledge, with its precious larding, must have been formed when the poles smoked and lava ran, before palms and treeferns grew there, when strange beasts roamed the primeval, tropic forests, before the poles shifted and the icecaps formed.

The quartz, with its infinitesimal atoms of water captured within its crystallization, that clutched the once molten gold turned out by Nature's crucibles, had lost its original homogeneousness. It was rotten where it was not brittle, pitted with cavities, with horizontal hollows along its weathered flank, eroded through the ages.

Often they could break off treasure chunks with prospectors' hammers, each blast disclosed the well-flecked matrix, with streaks and stringers of pure gold, with nuggets of it from pinpoint size up to peanuts.

It was a bonanza, as far as it went. Fortune—a dazzling future limited only by the extent of the reef—drove them on without knowledge of fatigue, of cold, hunger or time. The quartz seemed for the present unlimited. It might go down fifty, a hundred, or five hundred feet. It might even be big enough to be actually mined, worth the bringing in of machinery.

The fever of possession, of a glorious

horizon like a summer sunrise, drove them, spurred them. They worked like Titans until exhaustion drove them to food, to sleep, back to work again, muscles cramped and hands split and blistered.

Sometimes with the moon to guide them, or firelight, sometimes grubbing like gnomes beneath the stars.

The clock ceased to mean anything. Dogtired, their eyes burning, they pestled the rich fragments in an iron mortar. The canvas sacks that piled up in a corner of the cabin were fifty percent pure gold.

Meyer watched them when he could not sleep, evaluating them by the dim light that flowed through the grate of the stove, partly open, to keep the banked fire going through the night, or what served as night to them.

He was perpetually asking Bass to estimate their growing wealth. Thirty-five dollars an ounce back in the States. Over four hundred dollars a pound!

As weariness checked the initial fever of success, Bass began to grow conservative.

"We've got damn' nigh two hundred pounds of cracked stuff in those sacks," he said.

"That's close to about forty-thousand dollars between us. But we hit bedrock today, under the quartz. We ought to get about ten thousand more. Maybe that's a bit on the high side. But it's float reef, after all, and fifty thousand isn't bad. Twenty-five thousand apiece, with what you staked put on your share."

Meyer, bone-lean, a pit under his ribs where his belly had been, said nothing, staring with bloodshot eyes at the sacks. He had not stood up to it like Bass. His muscles rebelled, he primed himself with liquor, and the alcohol burned his reserves like a fever.

He would not let Bass go to the reef alone, lest Bass might hide out rich morsels on him, as he would have done himself.

Twenty-five thousand dollars was all right—but fifty thousand was better. That was a stake. He could set up a regular outfit with that bankroll, hire dealers, rook the miners.

To hell with the girl, May! He knew May would never play along with him, even if he got her to marry him, which he doubted. There would be plenty of other women. Bass could have her. That meant the stake split in half.

Bass had thrown away his gun, beaten him up. And but for him Bass would be a flop.

Haggard as a coyote in spring, Meyer squatted. Bass had turned in. He slept with his own gun under his pillow. He did not trust Meyer, curse him. There was the rifle, but Bass kept the magazine empty of shells, kept them also in his bunk.

The stove glowed cherry red. Meyer was infinitely weary. The air seemed heavy on his lungs. Bass insisted on leaving the door still clear for ventilation, but Meyer's lungs ached. He was hot, but he shivered nervously.

There might be an accident. It would have to be well handled or that smart-Alec corporal would suspect.

Meyer finished another bottle, rolled into the lower bunk, his mind dull, yet slowly forming resolution. If the reef was petering out, it was time to make another strike, one of his own contriving.

THEY had drilled ten holes, tamped in ten sticks, capped and fused.

The moon was gone. The stars had been brilliant, but the crackling Aurora eclipsed them, weaving ribbons of glorious static, rose, green, flaming white, glints of orange. They had hit bedrock again. The bonanza had almost yielded up its buried fortune.

Meyer, sodden with Pierre's liquor,

counted the shots. The quartz blew, scattering geysers of snowcrust and ice. It was a bitter night, that cut through their worn clothing to their marrow. But this was the final cleanup for the day, or the night, whichever it was. Who cared?

Meyer ran to see what the trove had yielded. In the lowest strata the gold seemed to be thickest, as if it had seeped down. He had often enough waited on the turn of a card to rake in riches. He was a true stakester, the gambling fever ran in his veins, but never so hotly and thickly as in this lottery of Nature.

Bass shouted at him, just as he stumbled, his feet clumsy from alcohol. He could not distinguish what Bass called out to him.

"One more! Only *nine! One more!*"

The tenth blast went off, a shot from a short barrel of rock that shattered as it blew, hurling its scattering fragments.

They split the air, they ripped the parka off the back of Bass, tore the hair from his scalp as he dived for his drunken partner, shielded him with his own body, rolled with him into a bank of snow.

It sobered Meyer, though he was deafened by the explosion, blinded, fighting to get in the clear.

"Close call, eh?" he said, squatting, feeling for his flask. "Let's see what we got, Bass."

"I'm getting back to the shack. I'm half-naked. What we got won't run away."

For once Bass' voice sounded sullen. Air at sixty-five below seared his bare back, congealed the wet blood on his scalp, seemed to probe his brain.

He started for the shack. He had saved Meyer's life at the risk of his own and Meyer did not seem to consider it worth mentioning. Bass did not ask for any display of gratitude, for any type of reward for an action that had been purely spontaneous. It was not so much Meyer he had rescued as a man in peril.

At the shack he opened up the stove, put on a little more coal, took off his torn parka, now beyond repair. He would have to make shift with less practical garments. He cleansed his aching scalp and his hair, put salve on the bald raw streak that would always remain with him as a souvenir, warmed up some food, enough for the two of them, not feeling up to getting a fresh meal.

Meyer came in with the flask finished, lurching through the door, moody and sullen. He had stayed to look at the result of their last blasting, but he said nothing about it.

He slowly opened up one of the few remaining bottles, poured out half a tincupful, gulped it down. He said he was not hungry, stopped talking after that statement.

Bass had a splitting headache and he turned in. Meyer made no inquiry about his injuries, but sat smoking and drinking, stoking the fire.

BASS woke up to a room filled with fumes, cloudy with tobacco smoke. The lamp was burning—and he saw Meyer's face. Usually the gambler seemed to wear the expressionless mask into which he had schooled himself. Now that mask was off. Bass saw the features of a fiend, of a man whose humanity is submerged, grinning, gloating over some obscene or bestial thought. Lips and teeth were parted, the tip of

his tongue showed between them like that of a hungry, anticipatory brute, ready to drool as it smells food. His nose had curved like the beak of a predatory bird, deep wrinkles bracketing mouth and nostrils. His eyes, bloodshot of whites, glowed with an incandescence, lurid as flames flickering above a pit in hell.

The face of a man who has lost humanity. For a moment Bass thought he was seeing Meyer in a nightmare, then he knew he was wide awake, and wondered if Meyer had gone insane, or was on the verge of delirium tremens. The bottle was on the floor, empty.

With his first movement, Meyer turned and looked toward the bunk. His mask was on again, but now it had taken on a new, permanent quality, a subtle slyness, a menacing malevolence. His eyes were still the eyes of a devil, but they held cunning rather than madness.

Bass felt the minatory threat, the cold hate of it. It seemed to sink in through his pores, to make his flesh crawl. His vitality was low, and he told himself he was getting nerves.

He knew many stories of partners shut up together who grew sullen, abusive and sometimes killed. But that sort of thing had seemed to vanish when they made the strike. He was not so sure now. He was going to hang on to his six-gun, keep the rifle unloaded.

It seemed to Bass that Cain must have looked like that at his brother Abel.

If they had reached the capacity of the ledge, it would be a good thing to take the dogs and get back to the trading post, make their divvy, each go his own way.

His head throbbed at the temples as if somebody was pounding it. His lungs ached as if they had been seared. Meyer, as usual, had shut off all ventilation, the stovepipe was badly clogged, the atmosphere was stifling.

To his relief Meyer got up, staggered to the door, opened it, stood there for a moment or two, went on out. A husky yelped. Meyer had probably stumbled over it as it lay buried in the snow, kicked it. The dancing light of the aurora flamed and faded, flamed and faded.

And through the open door came blessed oxygen. Meyer had left it open. Bass let the invigorating flow clear the cabin, recharge it with fresh air, before he got out of his bunk and closed it. The stovepipe would have to be cleared, he considered. It drew none too well, did not carry off the fumes of monoxide properly. And he supposed *he* would have to do it.

He did not know when Meyer returned from a pacing vigil where thoughts shuttled through a brain affected by alcohol that stimulated one idea.

Twenty-five thousand for two! Fifty thousand for one!

Fifty thousand for *one*. Fifty thousand for one!

The aurora seemed to pulse in time to the refrain. Fifty thousand for *one!*

There might have been a fatal accident today—another uncounted charge hanging fire—and then——

There would be no evidence, only the story of the survivor, the inheriting partner. The dead would be scattered and splotched over the desolate landscape.

Bass always prepared the charges, split the sticks, set in the capped fuses, tied them there, timed them. Meyer held the drills, mucked out the holes.

He would have to watch Bass more carefully after this, to see how he prepared the dynamite. It would have to be a flung stick, with a short fuse, hurled like a bomb. Unless—— His mind kept shuttling the warp and woof of his evil design, planning the best, most certain way; and always came the refrain:

Fifty thousand for one.

THE next morning he was affable. Solicitous about the hurts of Bass, offering to get breakfast, actually helping to.

"Why don't you lay off for a day or two?" he suggested. "I can clean up this last lot. You take things easy until we're ready to shoot again."

"We won't shoot any more, Meyer. For one thing, we've got down to the clean-up. For another, we used the last stick of dynamite yesterday."

The incandescent flames flickered in Meyer's eyes for a moment, but he did not look at Bass.

"No sense in stayin' here any longer than we have to," said Bass. "We ought to clean up an' get out of here, inside of ten days, back to the trading post. And then home. I can afford to fly out to railhead, if I can get hold of a plane."

His voice was jubilant. His headache was forgotten.

They went out together to the ledge.

After about an hour, Meyer wandered down the cut. He shouted excitedly:

"Here's a pocket, Bass, come an' look."

Bass joined him, looked where Meyer pointed.

"It's just pyrites," he said. "You ought to know fool's-gold by now, Meyer. When it glitters it isn't gold. That's the jeweler's job."

"I don't mean that stuff, Bass. Down below it, look inside that blowout hole, as you call it. Way down!"

Meyer's voice was convincing. Bass knelt, stooped to peer into the geodic cavity. The quartz crystals glittered, but there was no gold.

He started to get to his feet, and Meyer swung his prospector's hammer. Something warned Bass, perhaps some emanation of hate from Meyer that radio's to his subconsciousness. He half turned, half raised an arm, as the hammer crashed.

THE world turned to a whirling nebula of flame, of which he was the nucleus. It was shot through with streaks of vermilion, of purple and black. He seemed to be stabbed by a thousand lances, white-hot. The nebula dissolved. He fell through infinite space. He did not feel the second blow, nor the third.

He did not know when Meyer thrust him into a deep crevice, his head looking like a pulpy tomato, blood all over his torso.

There was brush that had been uncovered by the blasting, and Meyer snapped off the brittle stems to screen the body. In the spring, if not sooner, wild beasts would find it, scatter the evidence. He could always say there had been a blasting accident, and that he had buried Bass as best he could, being a chechako.

But when they found what was left of Bass, he should be far away. Panic struck at him. He would have to sledge-in the gold, using the dogs he could not handle well, facing the nosey corporal, Walsh, at the detachment. There was no other way out.

His plan, that had seemed so well laid overnight, fell apart like a spilled picture puzzle. Walsh would ask questions, damn his soul!

He might even detain him. It was like the dream that seems so cogent but, when remembered, is incoherent.

He could find a way out. The gold was his. Fifty thousand for one? And he the one!

That night the dogs howled and howled, like hounds of hell, as if sensing Bass was dead—murdered.

Meyer ate little, drank much. The dogs' baying made his nerves jerk. He remembered they had not been fed, went out to them.

They were ravenous and they snapped at him, never having liked him. He was in ugly mood, wondering whether he had trapped himself, after all. He got an axe-helve, and clubbed them before he fed them. They slashed his wrists above his mittens, grabbed his ankles before he half subdued them, and then forgot him, fighting in a mob for the food he should have rationed.

THE wind started to shift, the temperature went down—and down. A blizzard was coming from the Pole. It was only a warning as yet, but the wind shrieked and howled.

Fine snow began to sift through the logs. The fire jumped in the stove. Sometimes the draft sucked it up, but it fell back from the choked chimney.

Meyer did not want to eat. He wanted to think. He looked at the sacks of treasure, gloated over them.

The cabin seemed to shudder as the tempest rose.

Bass—stiff in the crevice of the ledge!

The snow was sifting in, like a winding-sheet. Meyer opened a bottle, starting to empty it, in gulps.

He stoked the stove with the soft coal they had brought in for an emergency like this.

The liquor warmed him, but his stomach rebelled. He had to eat something, gather his wits together.

Bass—Bass was a discard!

Suddenly there came a knocking on the door, muffled, uncertain.

Meyer went to the steamy window, in the lee of the storm, wiped it with his sleeve, saw what he thought in his drunkenness was the wraith of Bass, crusted with snow and ice, bloody beneath that icy screen.

He set the bar across the door, staggering back to the table, groping with uncertain fingers for the bottle.

The dogs howled.

"To hell with *you*, Bass," said Meyer as he drank. "To hell with you. You must be halfway there already, damn your soul!"

The stove got red hot but he felt cold, told himself he *was* cold, shivering with jangled nerves, vomiting when he tried to eat.

The wind sucked the draft up the clogged flue, and he used more coal, staggered to his bunk, and tumbled into it, still retching.

He lay there, wrapped in blankets, tried to climb out for more, though he was sweating, and the cherry-red of the stove was now white heat; fell back, dizzy and exhausted.

He felt as if his temples were being pounded, and as he lay shuddering, he heard distinctly a steady beating, like a drumbeat, like somebody—or *something*—pounding on the door, demanding vengeance.

V.

I WILL DESTROY, SAITH THE LORD

DR. FEISS, the anthropologist, was visiting Corporal Tim Walsh when the news came over the detachment radio about Meyer. Walsh was sorting Christmas mail for distribution on his next patrol. It had been brought in in June, cards, letters and parcels, marked DO NOT OPEN UNTIL CHRISTMAS.

Feiss was acting as volunteer assistant-postmaster. He was a man whose ambitions and professional aims were greater than his energies, never satisfied with progress made. He had overtaxed himself, got a touch of frost in one lung, and had taken his own enforced cure of complete rest. He was now fit again, talking over his contemplated trip to the Liard River.

There were resthouses, used by the Mounties on their patrols, kept supplied with wood, kindling, oil, and food, and Walsh was giving Feiss precise directions as to how to find them. They might well mean the difference between life and death.

"The rule is," said Walsh, "to leave all as you find it. Of course you might be unable to leave food, in extremity, but the oil and matches must not be used up, or must be replenished. 'Tis the same with the firewood, an' the splinters for kindlin'. Now the——"

He stopped to relight his pipe, when the static suddenly cleared on the radio,

an almost miraculous occurrence. There was weather on its way from the place where it is made, the regions round the pole. The magnetic phenomenon of the aurora and its connection with solar electrical impulses, raised mischief with reception nearly all the time.

Even now the news stuttered, blurred and crackled, but there were moments when it came distinctly. Walsh set down his pipe, held up his hand. This was their link with the outside world, his official link with Ottawa.

News of any sort was of tremendous importance.

"Did you hear that?" whispered Walsh. "'Tis Meyer they're talkin' of. Hugo Meyer, the one that grubstaked Bass, went with him after Nyoka's white rock gold mine. Whisht! They'll be repeating it."

The stern notice came across three times and, with Walsh expertly fiddling with the dial, they got enough fragments to piece the meaning together.

Meyer was well described, an American wanted for murder in the United States, the murder of a man cruelly battered, unable to speak or think, recovering consciousness after an operation, from which he rallied only enough to accuse Meyer, the gambler, before pneumonia ended all. Meyer was believed to be in Canada, in the Northwestern Provinces. All Mounted detachments were warned to be on the lookout, private citizens requested to communicate with Ottawa."

"Bloody murder! I can well believe it," said Walsh. "My mind has misgiven me, ever since I got the two together. If they found the gold—and I believe that's a good bet, for Nyoka wouldn't be lyin', —Meyer would want the lion's share."

"The lion's share being *all*," said Feiss. "So now what?"

"I'm goin' out to Bass' shack, to take the murderer. I doubt if they'll ever hang him, or burn him, or gas him to death, whichever happens to be the case in the State where the crime was committed. His lawyer'll raise a nice point over the operation. They'll be givin' him twenty years, with a third off for good behavior if he's not paroled before that. He should get ten lashes every month into the bargain. Cyanide's too good for the like of him. But I'll see he's slapped into the cell-house, an' kept there, till he can be shipped out, bad 'cess to him!"

"How soon are you going, Corporal?"

"This blessed night, as soon as I can get the dogs an' sleigh ready. 'Tis fine travelin'-crust now, but there'll be a rip-snortin' blizzard along an' we'll be lucky to dodge. Might have to put up at Bass' shack for a spell. I'll take handcuffs an' leg-irons for Mister Hugo Meyer, when he's not mushin' for his circulation."

"I'll go with you, Walsh."

The corporal looked at the scientist. They liked each other, admired each other for their differing qualifications.

"An' why not? You're in shape. 'Tis not a too long trip. An' I've a feelin' it might be as well if you went. I've not what MacNear calls his second-sight, but I've known some mighty curious things to happen up here. Mental telepathy, some call it, mental radio-transmission. 'Tis sure the shamans know of it, an' use it. Some whites have the faculty, not many. You'd know about that, Professor?"

"The Algonquin Nation practices it, the Chippewas have long done the same, through their medicine-men. It's tradition everywhere, throughout the Orient. Not quite understood, but eminently possible. No doubt of its existence, Walsh.

I'll be glad to go, and I'll take my medical kit along."

"Fine! I've a notion that Bass is tryin' to get through. Mind ye, that's a thing I'd never put into my report, but I've got the notion fixed that the lad needs help, an' needs it bad, just as much as Hugo Meyer needs bringin'-in. An' that's my plain duty, joinin' hands with my inclination. All five dogs are fit. I'll get hold of Constable Shiels, an' we'll get loaded. I'll leave him here in charge."

WALSH put on his regulation Klondike muskrat cap and a heavy Mackinaw, and went out while Feiss assembled his own equipment.

An hour later they were on the way, going fast, the dogs eager, the snow-crust perfect.

The aurora rolled in ribbons of gold, fringed with magenta. It changed form to fanlike clusters of rays, then to long draperies of amber and green, gliding over one another. Below it the sky seemed black over the frozen expanse, with one or two stars pinpointing through, a few more showing, higher up, where the gorgeous hues blended into gray mist, and from that to deepest blue.

Five hours out, and all the color bleached to white, dazzling rods, faintly tinged with azure. And, out of the void, came the faint harmony of the spheres, the mysterious music of the Northern Lights, not always heard, but never forgotten.

Then all the glory vanished. The stars rushed out, and soon began to grow dull, blurred by a veil of vapor, under which the wind moaned in gusts.

"Like all the banshees in the world," said Walsh. "There's weather in the makin'. It may blow so damned hard 'twill blow itself inside out. Here's hopin'. Mush on, you huskies, mush!"

The wind literally mounted, too high to even stir the granular crust that was well welded by the terrific cold. They held on, in a dreary twilight, with the bugling wind changing to deep diapasons of sound, thinning, recovering, in bursts of fury, high above their heads.

It was an eerie atmosphere, that seemed charged with predestined forces, with tides of happening. At times they seemed like straws in the maelstrom of the cosmos, infinitely puny. Again, it seemed to Walsh, and even to Feiss, the scientist, that they were on a definite mission, for which Nature had produced a portentous background. A wild night, that the dogs sensed, fur-to-leather, eager paws digging in.

Two hours from Bass' cabin, taking a brief breathing-space, the dogs started singing. They were not howling. It did not mean wolves, but fellowship.

"Somebody's sleighin' to the detachment," said Walsh. "It must be either Bass or Meyer, an' I'm bettin' it's not Hugo. He's not the kind dogs would sing for. They're singin' to their own, of course, but were he along, they'd keep quiet. Some men affect them that way, if it's a mile off. I sure hope it's Bass."

He was not so sure of that hope when the sleigh came into view, a Mackenzie toboggan, hauled in blundering fashion, unguided, by three huskies, who answered the yapping of their fellows, joyously, knowing themselves harnessed but masterless, making for the trading post by instinct. A fourth dog trailed along, unhitched.

On the sleigh lay Bass, the sleigh-furs bundled all about him, his head uncovered, except by a helmet of ice, all streaked with blood. The dogs' harness was in a muddle. He had evidently just been able to hitch the three, haphazard, to hie them on. The two teams fraternized while Feiss examined Bass.

"He's been slugged almost to death," he said, "but he had the stamina, and the guts, to hitch up three dogs. That ice on his head may save him. I can't tell about fractures until later. Meantime, Nature

is giving him the best of treatment, outside his heart. It's still beating. I can help that with a shot of adrenalin."

"He's all right the way he is, for a few hours?"

"With the adrenalin to pep up his heart, keep his circulation going, yes. Why?"

"We're bringin' in the man who slugged him."

"Then let's go to the cabin. Bass will stay unconscious. We'll wrap him up well. He may be frostbitten. The cabin's nearer than the post. I'd like to make an examination."

The cabin was tight-closed, and barred. The steam on the windows was sheet-ice, opaque. There was no response to the corporal's hammering, and he broke down the door with the axe carried on the sleigh, went in with his gun ready.

He staggered back. The air in the cabin was charged with death, strangling him, burning his lungs. Through a fog, the stove glowed redly.

"It's filled with carbonic monoxide," said Feiss. "There's nobody alive in here. Air it out, before we take in Bass."

MEYER was dead in his bunk, his face purple and congested.

"You said cyanide was too good for him," said Feiss. "But he was gassed to death. When that stove got white-hot, carbon monoxide flowed through it like water through a sieve, or sweat through open pores. The cabin was closed. That was the way Andrée died, as Stefansson proved, in a closed tent. Stefansson and his companions almost went out the same way in an igloo, but Stefansson knew what the telltale thumping at the temples meant, and dragged out his men in time. Dick Byrd was close to it in his observation dugout."

"How about Bass?"

"He'll pull through. Looks as if Meyer tried to murder him. The sheer cold saved him. He had amazing vitality."

"We'll round up the story later," said Walsh. "There's Meyer's motive, in those sacks in the corner. Fifty-per-cent free gold. All right to close the door now, Professor?"

Feiss sniffed, took a look at the sack Walsh had opened. Bass was in his own bunk, his heart beating faintly but regularly."

"Funny thing about monoxide poisoning," said Feiss. "It's really diaphragmatic. Stefansson said your heart beats like a drum, but you don't know it *is* your heart. You think it's somebody pounding on a drum, or on the door. You can shut the door, now, Walsh. Not too much coal, that pipe is clogged. But we can make a hot supper. Give Bass a little liquid nourishment. Some whiskey wouldn't hurt. Here's a bottle, with some left in it. I could use a little myself. How about you, Walsh?"

"Never on duty. I'll mix a toddy when we get back to the Post. I'll take canned soup."

He looked at the corpse of Meyer.

"He won't need leg-irons. I hope they let him loose in hell, an' chase him over redhot hurdles, to a bog of blazin' lava."

"You have a fine imagination, Walsh," said Feiss.

He lifted his snifter of whiskey.

"Here's hoping!"

"Mate a Guilty Conscience with a Forty-four Slug, and Fear Is Born"

THE BRIGHT STAR SHINES

By HOWARD NOSTRAND

Author of "The Spirit of Bobville," "Garvey Gets a Hunch," etc.

IF THEY had wanted to sneak up on him, they couldn't have chosen a better time. When a man is drilling into solid rock in his own mine a thousand feet from daylight, one of the things he doesn't expect is a visitor. Add to this the fact that he was only a short distance from a stope, whose vast walls were echoing and re-echoing the sound of his hammer until there might have been a hundred men working instead of one, and it is no wonder that they could stand watching him for fully five minutes before he sensed three living shadows behind him in the tunnel.

Over all was the uncertainty of reality in the crazy illumination of a carbide lamp hanging from a cross beam; huge timbers pushing up like giant trees, sweat glistening on the shoulders of the worker and tracing lines through the dust on his flesh, the battered dump-car standing piled high with rock rubbish, the swamp-like dampness lying underfoot.

It might have been a rat scuttling through some crevice that made the only break in the space of silence while he stood waiting for them to speak.

"We didn't find you up at your shack," said one, coming forward into the circle of light, "so we figgered you'd be in here somewheres, and then we heard the sound of your hammer."

He was a gaunt man with gray eyes in a dead white face. His voice, pitched startlingly high, carried out into far reaches and returned a faint and ghostlike, "Hammer, hammer."

"I'm most usually here," said the miner. "It isn't often anybody drops in. Supposing we go on outside to do our talkin'."

"We wasn't plannin' to stay very long," said the other, "and what has got to be said kin just as well be said right here.

It's advice more'n anything. We was drivin' past down below when Bill here," he waved a hand at one of his companions, "happened to notice that sign of yours down by the creek, and he says, 'Lem, mebbe we better go up an' warn that young feller up there at the Bright Star.' Well, I thought it was a good idea; so we come on up."

The miner laid his hammer on the ground. Walking over to the dump-car, he picked up a khaki shirt which had been thrown across it. While he was putting it on he said, "It's mighty thoughtful of you all to take the trouble of coming up here, and I thank you, but I don't see where this place is any worse than any other—so far as working it is concerned."

He looked straight at the man who had been talking, and who was the only one he could see very well. "I've been here going on eight months; I've cleared out two cave-ins, shored up between old timbers, crawled through places where I wouldn't shove a dog if I liked him, climbed on pegs to the other end of that stope out there, and in one way or another I've taken more chances than anybody but a damn fool would; and all that's happened to me is a couple of splinters in my fingers. Now I'm all set to start pullin' ore with the hard part all behind me, you come along to warn me—what about?"

The man rubbed his hand thoughtfully across his cheek. "Well," he said, "so long as you got the situation in hand like you say, there ain't nothin' we kin do. We was bein' neighborly, that's all. This is the first time we been around this way, an' we kinda wanted to let you know there's a jinx on the place—has been right from the start. Old Man Burton never made enough here to pay him day wages, an' his son got a mashed leg in one o' them cave-ins you was tellin' us about. It'll get anybody that tries to monkey with it—you mark my words."

He turned his back, said, "C'mon, boys," and started off down the tunnel. One of them switched on a pocket torch. It's wavering beam flickered along the uneven way until it joined the dot of daylight at the entrance.

The man they'd left behind reached up and unhooked his lamp. For a long time then he made no move, but stood quietly staring off toward the mouth of the mine. It was a puzzle to him that they had taken the trouble to come in; their excuse for it, and their abrupt departure were alike hard to understand. That the Bright Star was a jinx he did not believe, although he'd heard that same statement made many times.

Ever since he had pulled into the little town of Daybird in the early spring and had told old Abe Terris at the gas station that he was going to open up the mine again, people had been saying he was foolish; but as the long summer waned and he was still rolling in for his supplies on Saturday afternoons—and looking huskier than when he'd first come into the mountains—they'd stopped hinting that what had happened to the Burtons, father and son, might also happen to him, the grandson.

HIS visitors had no doubt been surprised when he'd snapped back the way he had, but they couldn't know that it was a tender subject with him; and that if he didn't believe in the jinx, a lot of things had been going on that he couldn't explain.

Even their call, the way they'd stood behind him, not saying anything, and the way the white-faced one had done all the talking—well, it hadn't seemed friendly. Maybe the place was getting on his nerves. He'd seen men go out of their heads underground in the big mines even when the pneumatic hammers of the other drillers on the shift were going wide open to keep them from feeling lonesome; but he knew himself too well to believe that anything like that could happen to him. This was no supersti-

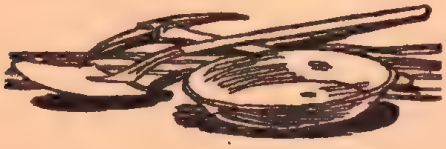
tious fear compounded of silence and darkness, but a malignant reality that he must face.

He remembered the rock slide that had blocked his road a mile below the shack and had held him up for almost two weeks at the very beginning of his stay. He'd always wondered what had started that. The ground had been hard, and the mountainside sloped upward for almost a mile with no sign of instability.

Then his water supply, only a trickle at best, had dried up; and he'd had to risk his neck in an eight hour climb up the stream bed to discover that another fall of rocks had diverted the flow to a small gully. At the time he'd thought nothing of it, but now he wished he'd given more attention to the way he'd found things. Viewed with a suspicious eye, those rocks might have told a story.

And then the whole entrance to the mine had caved in. He'd put in three full days timbering there to prevent such a catastrophe, and he'd been so satisfied with his job that he'd knocked off early to be in time for the second show at the Coliseum down in Daybird—as a kind of celebration.

When he'd returned, the first glance he directed at his most recent labors told him something was wrong, because even in the uncertain light of the moon the face of the



mountain showed a new outline. He had hurried over to find the new timbers sticking up through a mound of earth and rock, and only a small opening beyond to tell where the tunnel lay.

He'd had to move tons that time with his bare hands and a shovel, because his car had been left standing on the rails at the first cave-in three hundred feet from the mouth.

He couldn't even explain those cave-ins. Of course there's always the chance when men dig a hole in the ground and crawl into it, but the Bright Star had been well timbered, and he'd not had to do much more than inspect in most places. For fifteen years those two foot posts had supported the weight of a mountain without any noticeable displacement. Moreover, there were no geologic faults that might have explained what had happened. It was a jinx, all right, but a damn intelligent one.

There never had been any question of the ore content. With the old machinery it hadn't paid much, but he didn't have to worry about the refining now. Once he got a dump of reasonable proportions he could make terms with the smelters. The tailings of the old workings had assayed up to fifteen dollars a ton, and his recent samples were averaging almost twenty. Although they were a close-mouthed bunch down in the town, he knew that the word was passing around that Old Man Burton's grandson had come down from Utah to amuse himself in the old mine and was actually on his way to a pretty good thing.

If any of them knew about the troubles he'd had, they hadn't said anything to him. Certainly he hadn't let anything slip.

Maybe it had only been hard luck, but it looked fishy. He couldn't reach any conclusion as to the why or wherefore; each incident by itself was possible, but taken all together they totaled up to a sum that called for some consideration, and he resolved to do a bit of quiet investigating.

BY THE time he had cleaned up and dressed, the canyon was in shadow, but the valley floor lay shimmering in brilliant light and he knew he'd be in town before dark.

He climbed into his automobile, a runabout that had been converted into a truck by the removal of the rumble seat and the addition of a few boards, and started down. Although it was rough going, the radiator pointing one moment at the sky

and the next at the ground, the trail lay nearly straight for almost a mile. Then it seemed to end in space, as if the land had by some strange upheaval been torn apart and left on two levels.

The road made a sharp right turn around a shoulder of yellow rock and continued its roller-coaster descent to another hair-pin turn, and another, and another, until it came to the valley two thousand feet below. Dug out of the face of the mountain sixty years before, it had been intended merely for the use of men and burros; but as time went by and the Bright Star reached its zenith, it had been widened to allow wagons to pass.

Wagons, however, although they may seem clumsy on a concrete highway, are nowhere near so difficult to handle on sharp curves as automobiles. It was a job of work to ease the roadster around those turns, every one a series of backing, and moving forward a few feet, and backing again, with the mountain towering always a couple of inches from the mudguard on one side, and a front wheel knocking pebbles off into space on the other.

A thousand times Ken Burton had sweated around the bends, and had sworn that with his first earnings he'd rent a tractor, and buy some extra dynamite, and by God make himself a road out of that hell-twister!

But it was a lucky thing for him it was no smooth sailing that afternoon, or he'd never have reached Daybird—unless horizontally in a box.

He'd managed the first two curves, had slowed a little for the third, and was twisting the wheel for the first stab, putting his shoulder behind it because he was coming up a bit too fast and he figured on making a few extra inches by skidding, when something snapped in the steering mechanism.

It was a vicious wrench he'd given, and the unchecked force of it threw him against the side of the car, stunned; but his foot was on the brake pedal, and more by instinct than anything else he jammed down on it with all his strength. By the way the front end was tilted, and by the distance between him and the cliff, he knew that he was teetering on the edge of nothing, and that if he guessed wrong he might wind up a spongy mass of flesh and bloody clothing some two hundred feet below.

His first impulse was to jump clear, and he cautiously opened the door. Then the thought of what abandoning the car meant came to him—and he paused, with his left foot on the running board.

He still had a few dollars—more than enough to see him through until he began getting a return on his ore—but the bankroll couldn't stand the shock of buying another automobile, not even a junk heap; and this one he was in was far from that.

Experimentally, he shut off the motor, wondering whether the jerk it made in the frame as it stopped would be enough to send the whole thing over. Nothing happened.

He shoved the shift lever into reverse and pulled up on the parking brake; then he eased his body out onto solid ground like a tight-rope walker getting off a chair balanced at the center of the sag.

He stood for a time looking helplessly at the car. The right front wheel was out in space; the left one had only a couple of inches to go. What seemed to be holding was the tie-rod and the crank-case. Unless the edge gave way, it might stay where it was indefinitely; or until a sudden gust of wind should send it on its way. He picked up a rock and slid it in front of the inside rear wheel, realizing as he did so that it was a senseless gesture.

A plan was forming in his mind, however. Up at the mine he had block and tackle. If he could find some anchorage, and if his luck held, he might be able to drag the car back to the road. He glanced at it once more, shrugged, and started hiking up the steep grade.

WHEN he returned, even the valley was lost in darkness, except where a faint red glow and a barely perceptible twinkle of yellow light marked the position of Daybird. The rope lay over his shoulders with the blocks dangling on either side. In one hand he carried a small sledge-hammer and three drill lengths; in the other a kerosene lantern.

He drove a drill into the roadbed about ten feet from the car and pounded it down until only a few inches of it showed above the surface. With the other two he repeated the process, moving further away each time, so that in the end he had them making a line which slanted across the road at the same angle as the car's.

To them he tied a short length of rope which he threaded through the ring of the upper block; then he lengthened the space between the two pulleys so that the one with the hook lay under the rear bumper. Tying a loop of inch manila around the rear axle, he fastened the near pulley to it.

He was ready. Although he had nothing to snub on, he felt sure he could move the car, and keep it moving so long as his anchorage held. Taking a deep breath, he began to pull, gently at first, then gradually increasing the strain.

It was hard in the dim light to be sure of anything.

The car moved, but it seemed inclined to come crabwise with the wheels maintaining their same position.

At first he thought that the brakes were causing the trouble, but he soon realized that although the rear was dragging, the front was at fault. Unless he could twist the one front wheel so that it would slant across the road and give the other one a chance to climb, he'd be no better off than before—less in fact, since he'd shortened considerably the distance between the two pulleys.

He dared not kick the wheel; he strained until the veins stood out on his forehead before he turned it, because he was working against the weight of the whole front assembly. It moved some, however, and he tried the rope again.

This time he succeeded. It was so easy that his anxiety of the moment before seemed laughable. There was the car, and here he was—and everything was all right.

Only everything was not all right. He found that out after he'd nosed it across the road and a front wheel was securely wedged against the bank.

Locating the trouble in the steering mechanism was child's play. The arm at the end of the shaft was running free so that the wheel spun. It acted as if the key had been sheared off, but when he removed the arm, he discovered that there was no steel locking slug; a small piece of copper wire had been substituted.

For a long time he looked at this evidence that someone had tried to kill him; for the first time he became really afraid of something he could not understand.

HERE was an automobile that he'd bought new. Nobody had ever touched it, to his knowledge, but himself; and nobody would have deliberately done this thing unless they had wanted him out of the way for good. It must have been done while he was working in the mine, because he never could have driven from town without having that wire let go.

Immediately he thought of his visitors. Maybe they'd come into him for that reason—to keep him busy talking while another one set to work on the car.

While he was making a temporary repair with the aid of a nail that he'd found under the seat, filing it down to fit the groove on the shaft, he began to feel worried about leaving the mine, but he decided that it was necessary. After all, if they were willing to commit murder they wouldn't stop short of accomplishment, and judging from past performance it would be ingenious. He'd have to begin thinking of some way to protect himself.

He started down, nursing the car along,

his mind full of plans; but he was still hazy as to a course of action when he rolled into Daybird and pulled up in front of Terris' store.

It was ten-thirty, and the town was still stirring. Down the street people were coming out of the Coliseum. Chong Lee's Restaurant, Perkin's Soda Parlor, and the Highway Café were all open for business.

Ab Terris was waiting on somebody in his store. Ken could see that much, although it was hard to catch more than a glimpse of them among the boxes, and odds and ends of hardware that cluttered the place.

The sign read, "Automobile Supplies, Hardware and General Merchandise," and the last was an understatement. Ab carried everything from toothpicks to wolf traps, and his stock had overflowed into the windows and out again onto the floor. Unrecognizable equipment hung from the beams. Even the front porch had been pressed into service, and was sagging under the weight of two large crates containing some kind of green painted machinery—possibly a knocked down reaper for one of the ranchers in the valley.

Ken climbed wearily out of the roadster and crunched across the cinder parking space. Just before he stepped up on the porch, the customer who had been inside pushed open the screen door—and stopped short with his eyes bulging.

The young man might have brushed by him—he was busy with his own thoughts—but the other was in the way. Glancing up, Ken too froze in his tracks. It was his white-faced visitor.

"Well," said Ken at last, "good evening, Mister. It's a pleasure to see you again. I don't know of anybody I'd be more happy to meet. I was planning to look up you and your friends and return the call." He shoved his hands into his pockets and climbed the two steps, his eyes holding the other with an unblinking stare.

"That jinx," he continued, "works two ways from now on. You took the trouble to give me some advice; and I'm returning the favor. Now get out of my way. I've got some things to buy, and I'm in a hurry."

Without speaking, the man stepped aside; Ken swung open the door and strode over to the counter. Old Ab was looking across at him with more than the usual number of wrinkles in his forehead. "Evenin'," he said.

Ken motioned with a jerk of his head, "Who's that bird?"

"Lem Taylor."

"I haven't seen him around."

The storekeeper rested his elbow on a box. "Nope. He don't get over this way much."

"Where's he from?"

"Over the divide. Owns the Taylor Strike."

"Oh—mining man."

"Yeah."

Ken's eyes swung away to the crowded shelves at the rear. After a time he walked over to a glass case in a corner and bent down to look at a display of rifles. Finally he stood up and faced Terris. "Is this all you've got—" he asked, pointing at the case, "twenty-two's and air rifles?"

THE old man nodded. "An' a few shotguns. 'Tain't what you'd call a fast movin' line around these parts. Takes a lot o' gophers to wear out a gun. Take Sam Martin for instance; I got to keep percussion caps so's he kin shoot a carbine that dates before the Civil War. And when they do want a new one, like as not they get it by mail. Them things over there is

kinda languishin' until Christmas for some feller to come along an' buy one fer a son of his—or somethin'. A couple of 'em is good guns, though. You could give more'n a skin complaint with that middle one. That's a Winchester Fifty-two Factory Sporter. There's a Zeiss 'scope with a Niedner mount goes with it, an' it sells for around a hundred-sixty dollars."

He chuckled a bit before he said, "I'd let it go for a whole lot less. My son was ready to bite my ear off when the bill come in, but I figger that once in a while a man's got the right to indulge himself—if it's only a part of the store stock, and I ain't never even fired it."

"I'm not planning to shoot the eyes out of a rattlesnake," said Ken, "but I do want a gun."

The old man came out from behind his barricade of canned goods and prune boxes. "Listen," he said. "I knew your pa an' your gran'pa, so prob'ly I'm pushin' in now where I ain't wanted, but I'll fix you up with whatever you need, only it looks like you're on the road to some trouble, an' I'd like for you to tell me what's up."

"Nothing much, I guess," said the other. "Maybe I'll do some hunting. It gets kind of lonesome up there of an evening, and I could probably entertain myself by improving my shooting."

"Yeah," said Ab. "An' this is gettin' on toward the middle of the twentieth century, too, an' it's a long while since folks wore 'em low an' pulled 'em smokin'. You ain't foolin' me none—you been here for eight months an' you never been down except of a Saturday in all that time, exceptin' tonight. You meet a feller on my front porch an' talk to him like a Dutch uncle, an' then came in an' ask me who he is, like you never seen him before. An' then you start worryin' about buyin' a gun.

"Now I'm a friend o' yours whether you know it or not, an' I wanta know what's up, because I ain't got any use for that dough-faced buzzard neither. Anything you say won't go no further; but if Lem Taylor is up to something, I wanta be in on it."

He seemed to mean what he said, and after all there would be no real harm done, even if what had happened became generally known; it might discourage further aggressions. Ken mentioned the cave-ins and his findings, the rock-slides, and finally the way his car had been tampered with that afternoon.

As Terris listened, he began to fidget with a heavy gold watch chain that looped across his shirt and seemed to have displaced buttons as a means of holding his vest closed—or half closed; and when Ken had finished, he said, "Wait a minute," walked away, and climbed a flight of creaking stairs at the rear of the store.

HIS footsteps sounded overhead; something heavy was dragged across the floor; and then all was quiet for a time. Finally the footsteps sounded again; and Ab came into view loaded down with a large and dusty valise, and a canvas gun case.

"Take these out to your car," he said, "an' pull it around to the garage. I'm goin' to call up my son an' tell him to come over so's he can fix up that steering. Then I'm goin' to close up the store, an' we'll go over to the house, an' I'll get into some different clothes, an' then we'll go on up to that mine o' yours."

"Now wait a minute," said Ken. "I didn't come down here like a licked pup. I can look after my own affairs. You asked me what was the matter and I told you, but I wasn't making any appeal for assistance. Hell! man, you've got your store to take care of—and you don't even know me very well. Why should you go to any trouble?"

Old Ab grinned at him. "Jus' like your gran'pa — most independent coyote that ever howled." His mouth set in a grim line. "Now you listen to me, young feller. I'm goin' up there with you if I have

to hold a gun on you while you drive. I been livin' in these parts for so long that my nose begins to twitch at the scent of the kind o' trouble we grow before the birds that's goin' to start it know they're goin' to. I been marshal; I been round-up boss; an' I got my start sellin' barb wire to nesters an' clippers to cattlemen.

"For a long time now I ain't had a vacation, an' I'm due for one. I ain't aimin' to help you because I think you can't tend to your own affairs, but because I'm spoilin' for a fight; an' I think you got the makin's. You do like I say, an' don't stand here arguin' with a man that's older'n your gran'pa would be if he was still livin'."

It was after midnight before they left Daybird, and Ken had been growing more and more impatient for a long time. He started off at such a pace that Ab, sitting low in the seat, his arms folded and his eyes on the speedometer, finally said, "If I was you, I'd use my head a mite. From what you've told me I reckon Lem Taylor'd be saved a heap o' trouble if you broke your neck tonight."

"Yeah," said Ken, "but he knows I'm not up at the mine, and if he's responsible for what's happened he's had plenty of time for more surprises." He let up on the accelerator, however.

"I reckon not," Ab answered. "You give him somethin' to think about a while ago; and anyway from the looks of things he's got you in mind now more'n the mine."

THE road had curved so that the moon was ahead of them. Instead of helping the headlights, it shone in their eyes; and driving was doubly difficult. Every bump in the road loomed like a miniature mountain; every cactus plant, grotesque even in the day, was a fantastic and monstrous giant.

"What gets me," said Ken, "is that they should bother. What's the idea?"

"Well," said Ab, "if I knew I wouldn't keep it a secret. Mebbe I've got suspicions —mebbe you have. But I don't wanta hear yours, and I ain't goin' to tell you mine."

"Why not?"

"Well," the answer was a long while in coming, "you see, when it comes to facts, two heads is better than one; but when it comes to suspicions, it only increases the trouble—like a houn' dog followin' a scent an' comin' on four or five more. He gets so doggone confused he goes rarin across the landscape after a cottontail who ain't passed that way in years."

"But you have some suspicions."

"I ain't sayin'—but I'll tell you one thing: when you're down in the mine you can't be watchin' what's goin' on elsewhere, and it don't take no brains to see what happens at your place happens on the outside. So I been thinkin' of a plan. I told my son he ain't to expect me back till he sees me, and if anybody comes askin' he's to say I went on a buyin' trip to Salt Lake. You're goin' to keep right on workin' just as if nothin's happened; an' I'm goin' to keep outa sight in your cabin, but I'm goin' to keep my eyes peeled. An' when somethin' takes place that ain't in the usual nature o' things, I'm goin' to do some surprisin' on my own account."

"What do you suppose'll happen?"

"Like I said before, I dunno, but I got my Winchester along. It ain't no fancy gun — jes' an old lever action Seventy-three—but it's been a friend o' mine for a long time, an' there's more'n a box full o' cartridges in the valise—you can sure surprise hell out of a feller with a couple o' forty-four slugs."

The next morning Ken got to work at his usual time when the first rays of the sun went slanting across the canyon. Ab stayed in the cabin with his rifle ready for use. After a couple of hours of vigilance, he began to realize that it was a waiting game, and that he wasn't accomplishing anything by rushing from the window that overlooked the mine mouth to the door that opened on the trail. "Like a dog

chasin' his tail," he muttered to himself.

At the rate he was going, he'd be bored or crazy before the end of the day. One thing he was sure of—he had to keep out of sight. Lem Taylor was no fool, and he'd have some way of spying before he began anything. Ken, whether he knew it or not, was the bait; and Ab himself must remain the wholly unsuspected trap.

Among the things he'd hastily tossed into his valise, were a pair of binoculars. He found that they were fogged, either from neglect or careless handling—he'd lent them to anybody who'd asked for them—so he pushed the table into a position where he could glance up from time to time at the mine and the cliffs above, or by turning his head to command a view of the trail down to the jumping-off place.

It was easy to remove the lenses; and when Ken walked in at noon, the table was covered with small parts that Ab insisted he'd have back in no time. But he admitted, "I never took one o' these doggoned things apart all the way, and I guess I'm kinda mixed up about where I got some o' the stuff from."

He tackled the job again right after lunch. Ken was smiling as he left to begin his work. It was pleasant to have a companion. He'd never realized how lonely those eight months had been. He doubted whether Ab would really be of any use in case of trouble, but he was glad he was there.

THREE days went by. Ab finally got the binoculars together and spent most of his time combing the hillside with them, although he laid them aside to prepare the meals.

He complained that his sight was getting bad in his left eye, because he couldn't see with that one so well through the glasses; and even when Ken had the same difficulty, he refused to admit that he might have slipped in the assembling.

By eleven o'clock the next morning, Ken had made his last trip out to the dump with ore from the previous blast. Ab waved to him as he started back to begin drilling, and stayed at the window, busy, as usual, with the binoculars.

He seemed very interested in the cliff that towered above the workings; he had been paying more attention to it all along than to any other portion of the canyon. Gradually his head bent back as he aimed higher and higher toward the rim almost a thousand feet above him.

He began sweeping along the edge, the jutting rocks passing before his eyes like the shoulders of a railroad cut viewed from the window of a speeding train. When he came to a place where a crevice showed sky, the impression of falling off into space made him gasp. It was a kind of game he'd played a number of times, imagining himself running along the rim, and enjoying the shock when the support suddenly vanished.

He was grinning when he turned away to read over the labels of the canned goods piled on a shelf on the wall: Beans, Boston Style; Beans with Tomato Sauce; Pork and Beans; Spaghetti; Irish Stew; Vegetable Soup; Tomatoes.

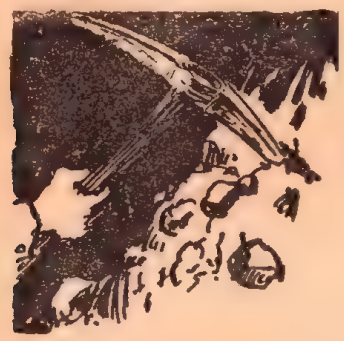
He was getting pretty tired of the diet, even though the altitude gave him a good appetite. There had been times in his life when any one of those cans would have been a treat, but he'd been spoiled too long by his wife's cooking; and, more recently, by his daughter-in-law's.

He shrugged his shoulders and reached for Beans with Tomato Sauce, but paused with his arm extended. In his mind something was clamoring for attention, some recent perception that he had not recognized. He could not place it at first, but he knew it was associated with that last hasty glance he'd taken at the mountain top; and, picking up the binoculars again, he went back to the window.

At once he knew what he had seen. It had been a movement of some kind among the rocks, a movement different from the one he himself had caused by swinging

the glasses. Like a man retracing his steps to find something he has lost, he sighted the crevice and moved up to the rim.

When he was squinting upward at a point directly over the mouth of the mine, he caught a glimpse of what looked like the body of a man, but his hand had begun to tremble so that he could not keep it in sight. He muttered angrily, cursing himself and the useless left lens.



Pulling over a chair, he straddled it, resting his elbows on the back. Now he saw that it was a man who was cautiously climbing down the cliff. A yellow rope was tied under his armpits in a kind of sling; it extended in a limp arc up over the edge.

Ab kept his attention fixed on the place where it disappeared, and at last he spied another man leaning over and peering down at the first one, who seemed to be heading for a ledge—or what looked like a ledge; it was hard to tell from below whether the scar on the cliff face was a level space, or merely a surface fissure.

Ab was surprised to discover that it was probably quite wide, because when the man reached it and began walking around, it concealed his body every time he left the edge.

The one on the skyline was keeping low, no doubt a precaution against being seen; but from the actions of his arms, he appeared to be lowering something.

It bothered Ab that he could not tell what it was, and it bothered him a lot more that he could not recognize either of the men. If the binoculars had been working properly, it would have been no trouble at all; as it was, their faces were merely blurs of rainbow colors, and everything his vision touched was likewise interestingly decorated.

He set the glasses down and squinted up against the brightness of the sky. Viewed piecemeal, and foggily at that, their actions had held no significance, but when the scene was presented to his gaze in its entirety, it abruptly took on a meaning.

"Why the dirty pole-cats!" he growled, grabbing his rifle and aiming it at the man on top.

HE TOOK his time about squeezing the trigger, because he had an aversion to shooting at a head. In addition to the difficulty of hitting such a small target at that range, he had no wish to kill if he could help it. After all, he was not absolutely sure of what they were doing; so he bided his time. When the man's shoulders showed for a moment, however, he let fly.

The gun barked, and echoes rattled back and forth in the canyon. Both men disappeared.

Ab reloaded. "Two birds with one stone," he said, taking a pot shot at the ledge.

Three or four times he fired before he began to realize that he was like a man who has lassoed a grizzly; so long as he kept shooting — kept a taut rope, so to speak—they'd lay low. But what would happen then?

His problem was solved by Ken, who came out of the mine as if he'd been blown out by a premature blast. He dashed into the cabin where Ab was still reloading and firing like a boy celebrating the Fourth of July.

"Hey!" he shouted. "What in hell's goin' on?"

"I got 'em," said Ab, not taking his eyes off the cliff. "One of 'em anyway. He's layin' low up there about a hundred feet below the top. He ain't hurt, but I'm re-

mindin' him every once in a while he better not try gettin' away. The other feller I shot at, and unless I forgot how, he's flat on his belly on the ridge. Mebbe there's more of 'em—I dunno."

"But what's the idea?"

"A smart one. They was gettin' ready to blow off the whole damn cliff—lettin' down wire and dynamite. It musta been dynamite. It was bein' let down careful, and it sure looked like a dynamite box—or I never sold one."

"Lem Taylor?"

"I dunno. He's bound to be in it somewheres, but with them binoculars actin' up the way they been I couldn't tell."

Ken looked up at the cliff and said, "Why, if you planted a couple of sticks on that ledge you could block the mine."

"Sure—damn near for keeps. Leastways it wouldn't be opened up in your lifetime; and it'd look plenty natural. It don't need no spring thaw to start slides in these hills."

"Well," said Ken, "I guess it's our move. I can't figure out what's behind it, but we've caught 'em at it, so it's up to us. Got any ideas?"

"Yeah—plenty. I'll keep 'em busy. You get the sheriff—or some o' the boys anyhow—an' go on over to the Taylor Strike. It hadn't ought to take more'n an hour. Then climb the mountain back o' their place an' collar 'em. But be sure you wave somethin' before you show yourselves on the skyline, because I'm sure going to blast hell outa anything that moves up there from now on."

"Now wait a minute," said Ken, staring at the old man as if he thought he'd lost his mind. "Maybe you know what you're talking about, but it don't make sense. It's fifteen miles from here to the Taylor Strike. I've never been there, but I know you have to go over by way of Pack Lake. What's that got to do with the rim of this mountain?"

"You been a dumb fool, young feller," said Ab. "Nex' time you get a map, take a look at it. By road, Taylor's is fifteen miles away, because it's on the other side o' the divide; but somewheres over that ridge, and not more'n a couple o' miles, is his mine. Now you get on outa here an' do like I say, because whoever's up there ain't arguin'. They're jus' naturally figgerin' out some way o' gettin' outa the fix they're in—an' I ain't no smarter'n they are."

AS KEN headed for the door, he added, "An' tell somebody to come up here after me, because I want to be in on the pow-wow over there."

He didn't do any more firing. There was no use in wasting cartridges. He began wondering what they were doing, and what he'd be doing if he were in the shoes of one of them. It made him uneasy in his mind.

The man on the ledge wasn't a factor—if he had a revolver he'd have used it already, and he wouldn't have been able to do any accurate shooting at that distance anyway. It was from the others that trouble would come.

The time passed slowly. He kept careful watch, but nobody appeared, and nothing happened. When he saw a flutter of white, he heaved a sigh of relief—he'd said an hour, and it was probably less than that, although he insisted later than he'd been there practically the whole day.

Figures were silhouetted against the sky. He went outside and waved. They waved back, and unceremoniously hauled up on the rope that still hung there, yanking away as if the burden on the end was a sack.

At the sound of whining gears, he moved out to the trail to discover a car climbing in low up the last steep grade to the cabin. The man who had come for him knew nothing except that Ken had told him to go up to the Bright Star; so they were both hungry for news, and they made good time getting to Taylor's Strike—most of it consumed on the switchrack,

because the other mine was not far off the main highway.

Ab climbed out and strode across to the unpainted shack that was office, dining room, and living quarters. Three men were inside—all townsmen.

"Where's the prisoners?"

"We only got one—Ben Carnol. He's in the back of the sheriff's car, handcuffed to one of the posse. He's sore as hell the others beat it off leavin' him down below, and he's willin' to give evidence. He's guidin' to a hideout now, but sheriff's takin' no chances. He's sent Selfridge down to Fairleyville to radio an alarm."

"No wounded?"

"Not that we know of."

"Hmm," said Ab. "That gun o' mine needs lookin' after then, because I had a bead on one of 'em, and I shoulda pinked him. Young Burton with 'em?"

"Nope—he's around—outside somewhere. He was lookin' down into the mine, last I saw of him."

Ab went over to the shaft and peered down. Ken was climbing the iron ladder. When he reached the top, he was face to face with the grinning store-keeper.

"Well, son," said the old man, "what'd you find out?"

Ken grinned back. "A couple of things. One of 'em is that you must have known right away what was up."

Ab shrugged. "Suspicions—nothin' definite. Only Taylor used to work for your pa. Shortly after the shut-down, he started this place, and then he petered out. Well, he got some money from somewheres a couple of years ago and began again. Did a lot of diggin' before pay-dirt showed, but it finally come through. Now I never give it a thought about them bein' just across the ridge, an' I guess nobody else did, 'ceptin' mebbe them boys that had went in with him. But your troubles kinda tied up things in my mind, so I made sure of it by lookin' over a map down to the store while you was a-frettin' around when your car was bein' fixed. I found out that as the crow flies the two mines is only a mile and a half or so from each other."

"They're a damn sight less than that underground," said Ken. "I just paced off their central tunnel, and it's twenty-two hundred paces—that's more'n a mile right there, and I'm in a thousand feet."

"Sure," said Ab, "you was near enough for them to hear you drillin', and they had to discourage you. When they couldn't, they got desperate—you might even have busted right into their tunnel—that's an old story in the mining game. And they wouldn't have had a leg to stand on, because they was stealin' ore from your property—from the other end."

"Yeah," said Ken, "but it's funny that they should beat it. If they'd stood their ground and brazened it out, we'd have had a goshawful job proving anything."

Ab chuckled. "You mate a guilty conscience with a forty-four slug, and fear is born."

"I sure have a lot to thank you for."

"Don't mention it, son. It was a pleasure."

"You don't want to go right back to town, do you?" asked Ken. "There was something wistful about it, almost as if he were a small boy. "You can go back to the mine with me first. We'll have lunch, and then I'll take you back to town."

Ab smiled. "I told you first-off I was on a vacation. There's a lot o' things I'd like to see up to your place that I didn't have time to on account I couldn't show myself, but there ain't no call to go right back. Let's you an' me go down to Daybird. I'm kinda hankerin' for one o' my daughter-in-law's meals, an' she always has somethin' interestin' for supper."

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Rebated—the Fee for Turning Loose a Tiger

REBATE

By ROBERT H. RHODE

Author of "Trailer Trail," "Chinaman's Chance," etc.

IT WAS a nice funeral. Considering that Joe Quate's discoverable estate grossed eight dollars and sixty-five cents and the clothes he dropped in, and that Joe passed on one hundred percent friendless and unmourned, a very neat funeral indeed.

Of course Joe Quate had big money holed away somewhere. Less than a month before the obsequies his mob tapped the Sterrett National Bank for forty-seven thousand, and a rugged individualist like Joe would have cut himself deep into that. But the fact remains that assets in sight at demise consisted of a five dollar bill, three ones, two quarters, one dime and one nickel.

Frisking decedent, I listed no stocks, no bonds, no mortgages, no jewelry; no personality whatever except one blue serge suit with a couple of holes alongside the left lapel. The eight sixty-five was all he had on him.

And still, Nickersmith's, Inc., certainly did put Joey under in bang-up style. The rites were run off in the gray of milk-time, zipped through as fast as a newsreel in a movie grind house because of a certain pressure for privacy. But aside from the rush, Joe had everything the best. Gerry Brown told me to see that he did, and believe me there wasn't one coach charged on Nickersmith's long itemized statement that didn't actually follow the hearse.

All those shiny, empty hacks included, the planting cost $1,008.65—and with a former C. P. A. supervising, I'm here to tell you that $1,008.65 can fetch a hell of a lot of service even from a gyp like Nickersmith. I take a bow on it; Joe Quate, no question, had as handsome a funeral as ever rolled out to Potter's Field.

SAME as with Dillinger, who may have got a bigger press than Quate but never was any harder, it was a woman that turned Joe in. If she repented after she squawked she kept it to herself. To

us she was just a voice on the F. B. I. wire, a mad voice talking fast. When she hung up that was the last of her. She took no part in the funeral personally or financially.

The solemn little four-eyed guy that smoked Joe down was not present, either. He was back at his desk in Washington. Nickersmith was there, and I was there, and counting out the mob of black-gloved hackies we two were the whole gallery until Gerry Brown came out to see the earth patted smooth over the late Mr. Quate and pay off the mortician with spot cash graveside.

Gerry was a little mournful; not by any means on account of what had happened to Quate, but entirely because of the way it happened. I could sympathize with him, for he had very naturally figured that tip from Joe's ex-girl friend as a direct and personal answer to a petition he'd had on the ether ever since Joey rubbed out Special Agent Hugh Blashfield with a Thompson s. m. back of Waukesha.

A hundred agents would have given their right arms to have brought Quate in, up or down, but prima facie it was fitting and proper that the job should go to Gerry. On known fact his claim was incontestable; and when fate plugged in Quate's soured sweetie on Gerry Brown's own line nobody who had seen Gerry struggling the last many months to run two families on one salary could have called it anything but poetic justice at last operating.

No—nor wondered, either, that Gerry's face all but showed the marks of the slap when he teletyped Washington he had Joe Quate practically in the bag and got back a prompt, flat order to hold everything until a swivel-chair strategist named Sanford arrived by plane to organize the collar.

Not the Chief himself, mind. Just this minor Brass Hat Wallace Sanford that none of us assigned to Gerry's office had ever laid eyes on, a paper-work wizard whose recent services to the Bureau had consisted exclusively of shining his pants on a seat beside the Throne.

Gerry Brown was bitter. He said things he was sorry for as soon as he said them. But even while he was frothing he was rapid-firing on the phone, and in not more than twenty minutes he had yanked in half a dozen agents and was racing off to put a plant on the farm-house downstate indicated as the current Quate hide-out.

It was ten a. m. then and past two p. m. when unwanted Wallace Sanford lit at the airport, where I was waiting with a geared-up bus. He didn't look like much. Desk-huddler was written all over him. He was a thin, pale, mute, spectacled, dead-pan bird—but a few minutes away from the field I noticed the dead pan slip when I squeezed between two trucks with the speedometer at a hundred even. Sanford didn't like it.

"Fool chance!" he snapped. "I'm not here to get smashed up in an accident."

I told him, "Right! I'll be careful." And then I boosted to 105 and afterwards passed a Greyhound on a blind curve, spiting the guy for Gerry.

IN THE third county out we swung onto a roller-coaster hill road where Gerry Brown flagged us. The long wait hadn't sweetened him any. He was about as cordial with Wallace Sanford as he would have been with Joseph Quate.

"The house is just over the next hill," he told him, "and Quate is in the house. He hasn't seen us, but we've seen him. He's alone. Now that *you're* here, is it all right to go ahead and take him out?"

Four Eyes shook his head. "No," he said. "It's my chance. I'll take him out. If he bolts, stand by to nail him."

Gerry reddened up. He snapped, "Quate's no mope, Sanford. He's dynamite. That's one thing. Another—he knocked off Special Agent Hugh Blashfield last year. Remember?"

"Very distinctly," Sanford said. "I have Blashfield in mind. That's why—"

He started to turn away and Gerry caught his arm.

"You listen!" he gritted. "That same Blashfield happened to be my best friend. Also, he was my sister's husband—and she, poor kid, she's half dead herself grieving for him. That ought to leave it up to me to handle Joe Quate my own way. Damn right it ought to! However, my orders read that you're in charge. If the credit means so much—"

Sanford blinked behind his big round black-rimmed cheaters. He echoed, "Credit!" and cracked a wincy smile. Then he said, "Bosh!" and walked on up the hill. We couldn't hold him.

At that minute Quate must have been opening the hide-away door. In the barn behind the farmhouse he had an old coupe and he was heading for the car, bound God knows where, when he saw that skinny goggled figure coming over the rise.

He stopped and looked; took a couple more steps and stopped again. Sanford didn't stop at all. He walked steadily down-hill, not fast and not slow. Then he turned through a break in a wavy fence and made straight for Bad Man Quate.

THERE wasn't twenty feet between them when Quate got the idea. He popped out a pistol—but that was not the gun we heard at the hilltop. A pen-pushing hand had been quicker than Joe's and Quate was horizontal on a landscape suddenly sprouting Federal agents all around him when Gerry Brown and I broke cover.

Down there in the farm-yard Sanford was blinking at Joey as if he couldn't quite believe it himself. His face was sweaty and there was mist on his glasses when he swung them to Gerry.

"Yes—Hugh Blashfield!" he said, his voice all off the ratchet. "It couldn't be allowed to happen again. I couldn't let it happen. *Couldn't* sit there in Washington and let somebody else walk into Quate. The same day Blashfield went I told the Chief I couldn't. Since that day I haven't had a decent sleep, hardly have been able to live with myself."

Joey's automatic had dropped close to him and even with the death-fog in his eyes he was groping for it. I jumped and kicked it out of his reach, and that way I missed something else that Sanford said. I saw Gerry Brown staring at him.

"Quate? Your—*what?*"

"Client," Sanford said. "Long ago. Down home in Texas, my first year out of law school. He was a punk kid hijacker, in a bad jam over a shooting at a gas station."

Gerry exploded, "Abilene! That jam?"

"That one. Yes. First and last time Quate was ever caged. If he'd got what was coming to him then he'd have been out of circulation all this time. Would've been in prison yet and for years to come. I was just a cub attorney, understand. Criminal law was only a game to me—part chess, part racket. And I needed money, needed it like hell. Quate had friends then, money men.

"Poor Blashfield! His blood is on my head! *I* was Quate's defense counsel in the Abilene case. I beat the rap for him, tricked an acquittal by bullying witnesses and emoting to a dumb-bell jury.

"Oh, a glorious victory! I'd earned a big enough fee to marry on. I was high, I tell you—but my own girl took me down. She saw things that I hadn't seen, refused to step into a home that crooks' money had furnished, finally had me feeling like a crook myself.

"I promised her that night that I'd never defend another man I didn't hon-

estly believe innocent, never as much as buy myself a necktie out of my fee for turning a tiger loose. And I haven't.

"We've lived in single rooms and cooked on gas plates, sometimes been damn close to having nothing to cook at all. Yes, until I made F. B. I. it was tough sledding. But not a red cent of Joe Quate's money have I touched to this day. I don't want it. I'm turning it back to him—*now!*"

Searching Quate just in case he might have a second gun and a parting thought, I had uncovered the eight sixty-five by that time. And right then there was a last minute accrual. Sanford stood by me ripping open a worn envelope and a shower of bills floated down around Joey's little pile. They were hundred-dollar bills—ten of 'em.

Gerry Brown looked at Sanford and then he looked at Quate. He had stopped being sore. His voice showed it.

"Joey's gone—but he's got the rebate, Sanford. It's off your chest. *His* money! And eight sixty-five plus a thousand—that should bury him pretty. Say, why not?"

So that's how come Gerry Brown and I stood by Joe Quate's grave a couple of mornings later at Potter's Field and watched the spades patting. When I heard Gerry whisper, "Rest in peace!" I knew that wasn't for the guy down under. He meant it for Hugh Blashfield—and I think in quite a bit of part for Wallace Sanford too.

CURIOUS FISHING SUPERSTITIONS

Kenneth P. Wood

IN British Columbia the Indians ceremoniously go out to meet the first salmon, and in flattering voices try to win their favor by calling them all chiefs. Every spring in California the Karaks used to dance for salmon. Meanwhile one of their number secluded himself in the mountains and fasted for ten days. Upon his return he solemnly approached the river, took the first salmon of the catch, ate some of it, and with the remainder lighted a sacrificial fire. The same Indians laboriously climbed to the mountain top after the poles for the spearing-booth, being convinced that if they were gathered where the salmon were watching no fish would be caught. In Japan, among the primitive race of the Ainos, even the women left at home are not allowed to talk, lest the fish may hear and disapprove, while the first catch of fish is always brought in through a window instead of a door, so that other fish may not see.